



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 aspects of human life.

A powerful contemporary writer, Azad is a maverick, and proud to be one. "I am the prime anti-establishment writer of the time," Azad claimed in an interview. "Besides, I am not traditional in my literary activity — be it any branch of literature."

The claims have some basis. He is versatile. One would hardly find any other Bangla writer at present, who is as much at ease in so many genres as Azad is. He is a poet, linguist, novelist, literary critic, essayist, columnist and more. Besides, he is a self-professed

'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 ignorance is the source of all beliefs, which are being nurtured over centuries by vested interests across the world.

He attacks religion particularly in his fiction *Shubhabrata*. Here he satirically depicts the nemesis of a 'prophet', who eventually becomes the king of the territory he lives in, and how his council of ministers exploit his so-called spiritual powers to expand their kingdom. They eventually kill him. *Shubhabrata* is a very interesting novel. Nevertheless, what seems missing in it is some sociological understanding of

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 *Olokik 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 published in 1993. Azad asserts that his poems are burdened neither with traditional Bangla lyricism, nor sociopolitical contents. You would find a lot of imagery in my poems that come in a modern way," he says.

"Besides, I am the last person to forge any compromise, especially when it comes to aesthetic beauty." As a poet, he loves to identify himself as a successor of the five great Bangla poets (Shidhindra Nath Dutta and others) of the 1930s, not of Rabindranath Thakur. "Rabindranath is a definitely a great poet, but he

*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 claim that they did not accept the comfortable academic life of a university professor.

Azad has made another distinct contribution to modern Bangla literature, which is artistically anatomizing relations between man and women and determining the role of sex in gender relations — a branch of knowledge Azad's predecessors have always shied away from. His novels, particularly *Sab Kichhu Benge Pare* (Everything Falls Apart), have dealt with the issue very openly. It has, of course, been alleged that Azad is some-

er standards of the local politicians in his book *Rajnitibidgan* (The Politicians). Even his latest prose work, *Amra Ki*

er 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

clarity 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. Sloganmongers 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 Primalization 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. *Olokik Ishtimar* (Miracle Steamer, 1973), *Chappanno Hajar Bargamail* (Fifty-six Thousand Square Miles), *Shubhabrata*, *Amar Abishvash* (My Unbelief, 1997), *Rajnitibidgan* (The Politicians), *Sab Kichhu Benge Pare* (Everything Falls Apart), *Kabi o Dandita Apurush* (Poet and a Punished Non-man), *Bangla Bhasha* (Bangla Language), *Amra Ki Eie Bangladesh Cheyechilam* (Did We Want This Bangladesh, February 2003) Besides, two of his major research works on the origin and development of feminist literature are *Nari* (Women) and *Ditiya Linga* (Second Sex), published in 1992 and 1998 respectively. Two of his books for children *Lal Nil Dipabali*, *Ba Bangla Sahityer Jibani* (Colourful Lights, or the Biography of Bangla Literature) and *Koto Nadi Sorobar* have been translated into Japanese this year

**Awards:** Bangla Academy Awards and Shishu Academy Awards for literature