**Sound of books**

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A FA 2021-02-12

`MUQABILA, aur woh bhi shaan-o-shaukat ka`(competition that too of ostentation).

`Zehniyat is tarah nahin badatti jab tak rnahaul nahin badalta`(the mindset does not change until the environment changes). `Turnharay paas bangla nahin, nokar nahin, par turn zaat kap kitnay achchay ho. Sharif ho`(You do not have a house, or a servant. Yet how decent you are by temperament. How good you are.) These are snatches of conversation from Hajra Masroor`s short story Standard.

Through its protagonist, Begum Riaz, the author astutely comments on Pakistan`s society and its culture of ostentation. The story was written more than 60 years ago but remains relevant.

One of the front-ranking Progressive writers of her day and a feminist, Hajra wrote and spoke fearlessly and enjoyed much respect in literary circles.

It was a fascinating experience revisiting Hajra Apa. I didn`t read Standard, I listened to it. It was the 52nd episode in Zambeelnama, a dramatic reading series. It had a powerful impact on me as the medium of the sound enhanced its ef fect bringing back old memories of a woman I knew so wellfriendly but with a mind of her own.

I kept thinking of her for a long time and wondered how many people now remember her. The younger generations may not even be f amiliar with her name. As for reading her work, book-reading has never been our forte and so one cannot expect her to have a wide readership. Besides, the written word itself is dying.

The aural has come into vogue. Digitally, the audio is easier to disseminate. Moreover, those who can`t read can atleast enjoy whatis narrated or recited. Hence, dramatic skills are of the essence. The performing artist who has mastered his voice wins the day and holds the audience spellbound.

These are the virtues of Zambeelnama which brings a new story for its fans on the dot, the first of every month. Behind it is a driving force: the well-modulated and richly expressive voice of Asma Mundrawala, a visual artist who teaches fine arts at Karachi`s Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture.

With a DPhil degree from the University of Sussex, Asma describes herself also as a theatre practitioner, having taken her training from the venerable Sheema Kermani at Tehreek-i-Niswan. `Both trajectories have informed my creative practice over the years, informing and feeding off each other,` Asma observes. This quality enhances her performance.

Zambeel Dramatic Readings had an informalbeginningwhenafriendrequestedAsma and Mahvash Farugi to do a six-minute reading performance at an event she was organising. They received an appreciative responseas the two partners had been imaginative in creating an ambience for the reading, and paid attention to the distribution of voices and selection of the music that supported the text. Thus began Zambeel Dramatic Readings in 2011. In 2016, it went digital with the launch of Zambeelnama. There has been no looking back thereafter. Zambeelnama brought the readings online making them easily accessible.

Mahvash passed away in 2018 leaving Asma to sustain this labour of love more or less single-handedly, which she has done.

This month brought the 53rd episode.

For Asma, Zambeel is an opportunity for artistic practice which every artist singer or performer needs and is always a solitary act in the quest of perfection. It also creates a sense of satisfaction born out of a commitment fulfilled. Since Zambeel presents the best of Urdu literature to the audience it has its own charm. The selection of the text involves a lot of reading and research.

Not being a scholar of Urdu literature,Asma spends hours studying the work of the great Urdu writers. The fact is that the performer must understand the characters well and internalise them if they are to be articulated in the correct pitch and accent. I thinkthe best compliment came from Navid, Hajra Apa`sdaughter,whoremarkedafterlistening to Standard, `It sounded like Ammi.

Why this name? Zambeel was the furry bag that Amar Ayyar, the companion of Ameer Hamza, carried with him. It was full of odds and ends, including a castle, that Ayyar used to play his tricks. These stories contained adventure, romance and trickery.

Good Urdu literature has much to offer.

Zambeel seeks to establish a connection with the legendary practice of dastaangoce but with a difference. The dastaangos created their own stories unlike Zambeel readings.

Incontemporary times, Zambeel has greater appeal. The stories selected touch a chord in the contemporary audience by multiplying the magical effect of Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Intezar Husain, the two sisters Hajra and Khadija, and many more. The dramatised rendering of Urdu literary texts is in effect a harmonisation of drama and recitation that not only enlivens them but also interprets them.

Why not use the dramatised readings in schools and on television for the revival of public interest in Urdu literature? m www.zubeidamustafa.com