

CROSSING BOUNDARIES



**Musings on Language, Literature
and Culture**



IIUM Press

Edited by Md. Mahmudul Hasan

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Crossing Boundaries and Celebrating Diversity

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In *Crisis in Muslim Education*, Syed Sajjad Husain and Syed Ali Ashraf (1979) state that human history “is replete with examples of social change, technological improvement and deliberate or involuntary transformation. From time immemorial the instruments of civilization have been improved and hence its social organization has become more and more complex” (p. 8). Extrinsic and extraneous changes in human society with the variations in time and space are obvious, and this sometimes results in external behavioral changes in people’s life. However, although inner feelings and abilities and external behaviors at times overlap and are closely related to each other, there are some fundamental elements of human nature which never undergo any change with the alteration in social situations. The human spirit of various historical periods and spatiotemporal locations has remained unchanged and will never be changed. In this regard, Husain and Ashraf (1979) refer to the inherent, perennial human ability to appreciate “the drawings of cave-men or the epics of Homer, Firdausi and Valkimi” and argue: “Had man’s nature been changed by nurture, had social organization been able to transform the basic nature of man, it would have been impossible for a modern man to appreciate Shakespeare or the Noh plays of Japan” (p. 8).

Literature deals with our individual and collective selves, experiences and preoccupations, and thus creates a beautiful and harmonious whole of human knowledge. It talks about truth and falsehood, love and hatred, mercy and cruelty, justice and injustice, beauty and ugliness, compassion and indifference and all other fundamental human passions. Our admiration and support for one group of these passions is instinctive, while the contrary passions invariably evoke our spontaneous censure and disapproval. We may encounter language barriers to understand literary pieces from other cultures, but once that obstacle is overcome and removed, poets and writers become our common friends and our shared story tellers and are celebrated across various cultural communities.

This shared experience of humanity is perhaps because of our common origin. As the Qur’an states, despite all our apparent and superficial differences, we have come from the same parenthood: “O people! be mindful of (your duty to) your Lord Who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same (kind) and spread from these two, many men and women [...]” (4:1). “And humankind is nothing but a single community [...]” (10: 19). So we all belong to one human family and all our stories are essentially of similar nature.

Failure to appreciate this essential commonality and excessive emphasis on differences have caused the human race many troubles and calamities. Many wars and devastations and exploitations of fellow human beings have been driven by this