

THE REVIEW DAWN

September 18, 2008

PROFILE: ‘SABEEN MAHMUD’: Striving For Better By Saad Shafqat

Sabeen Mahmud says her biggest dream is to change the world for the better through the Internet, through design, and through other communication technologies. ‘The Second Floor’ is a channel to weave debate, dialogue, music, literature, cinema and social commentary into her activism, which drives her.

There is no shortage of characteristics that define Sabeen Mahmud. In a candid manner, she will tell you that she (a) hates money; (b) has little patience for formal schooling; and (c) loves playing cricket with grown men. This is just the beginning. When she speaks, she moves seamlessly between English and Urdu. Her manner is to look directly into your eyes, and her tone is one of abrupt frankness spiced every now and then with a hint of indignation.

All this should come as no surprise to visitors to The Second Floor, an emerging phenomenon on Karachi’s cultural landscape and the source of Mahmud’s developing reputation as a crusader committed to making the world a better place. Conceived as a bookstore and café patterned after the old coffeehouse culture of Lahore and Karachi, The Second Floor — or T2F, as everyone calls it — states on its website that it was born out of a desire to enact transformational change in urban Pakistani society. The place has quickly taken on a life of its own, holding frequent literary and cultural events ranging from readings, recitals, and discussions to book launches and screenings of independent cinema and documentaries.

It takes a special person to produce something so refreshing and make it a hit. Sabeen Mahmud credits her partner, Zaheer Kidvai, as well as

Karachi's intellectual energy, for its success, yet there is no mistaking that its vibrant and intelligent appeal is foremost an expression of Mahmud's distinctive mind and personality.

There is certainly ample indication from Mahmud's personal background that she was destined to be distinctive. "I come from a very middle class family," she says. "I did attend Karachi Grammar School — a place for rich kids — but it was purely by accident. My parents had never heard of the school and the only reason they tried to get me admitted was that they saw a long queue outside one day as they were passing by."

Among her early influences, Mahmud recalls her kindergarten teacher creating an unconventional atmosphere in the classroom that has left an impression. "Mrs Lobo was almost radical by modern standards," she continues. "She was full of inspiring one-liners and constant encouragement for the children that made you feel — wow! I am sure that has shaped me in some way."

The most dominant formative influence in her life, however, has been her mother, Mahenaz Mahmud. "I am so proud of her," she says. "I am an only child, and for the first several years of my life my mother was utterly devoted to me," she adds. "It's been my good fortune, because my mother's very progressive, and she saw to it that I was given a lot of independence and implicit trust. It taught me to solve my own problems and make my own way."

"I'm running on adrenaline," Sabeen Mahmud says. "There's a lot of horrible stuff going on in this world. You can't rest until you know you've done all you could to try and make things better."

Sabeen Mahmud's father, too, complemented the home environment in important ways. "He wasn't the typical chauvinist husband or dad," she says, and would happily do the dishes and other chores. For several years, the family didn't have a car and Mahmud was dropped off at school on a motorbike. Yet the confidence imparted by her upbringing was such that she never felt deprived or out of place. When they did get a car, her father often went around to the various auto parts markets around the city to fix it up, and she accompanied him. "That's where I get my street smartness

from,” she says with a twinkle. “It made me one of the few children in my school who had seen the ‘other side of the bridge’.”

The net effect of these influences was for Mahmud to grow up as a global citizen, as she describes it. “To this day, I can’t distinguish between ethnic labels such as Punjabi, Behari, Pathan, etc.,” she says, “which many people take for granted.” She is firm that these labels don’t matter, and achieve little other than serving as excuses for prejudice. “People are quick to judge,” she adds, “but instead of passing judgment, they need to understand their motivations.” The approach embodies a rejection of elitism and an unadorned embrace of human goodness.

The theme of elitism led us naturally into something Mahmud struggles with — the increasingly upscale and elitist image of the T2F itself. “Part of this image stems from our location, which is in Defence,” she says, “and part of it is probably also our menu, which offers quality fare and so tends to be on the expensive side.”

However, she is quick to point out that the doors are open to everyone. “People are welcome to attend any event, and if the coffee is a bit pricey, well, you don’t have to buy it.” Occasionally, people will suggest that she start some kind of membership. “Never,” says Mahmud, “that kind of thinking is anathema to our ethos.”

In fact, Mahmud goes a step further and turns the whole elitism argument on its head. One of her missions, she says resolutely, is to burst the bubble of our urban upper-middle class by engaging them to look beyond stereotypes.

After completing O levels in Karachi, Mahmud went to Kinnaird College in Lahore where she earned a Bachelor’s, and then returned home to work in business. Her field was computers, and she developed an interest in it through a rather indirect way. “I struggled a bit with computers when the subject was introduced at school. It was my misfortune to have a teacher who, instead of being helpful and supportive, took on an attitude that was frankly belittling and mean.” But instead of demoralising or depressing her, the teacher’s approach had the unintended result of spurring Mahmud to master the subject.

On her mother's suggestion, she got in touch with Solutions Unlimited, a tech business that was supplying computing hardware to her school and which was headed by Zaheer Kidvai.

The company was primarily an Apple Computer dealership, but with a strong focus on computer education, it conducted through summer courses and workshops. "Thanks to this nasty teacher," she says with a forlorn frown that rapidly creases into a smile, "I came into contact with my first Macintosh computer and fell in love with it." It was also the start of a nurturing friendship and mentoring relationship with Zaheer, who had seen the spark in Sabeen Mahmud and brought her computing talent alive.

The contrast between what she faced in school and the learning experience at Solutions Unlimited triggered revulsion for the strictures of formal schooling. "It stifles initiative and intelligence," says Mahmud about organised school education. She no longer harbours any bitterness or resentment, but she is very clear that, from an activism viewpoint, the whole school industry needs to be persuaded of the value of meaningful reforms. "Schools are domineering structures wielding great power to make or break a child's future. There is a need to adopt a very thoughtful and measured approach to judging a child's abilities and potential. At present, we are far from that ideal," explains Mahmud.

Despite the harrowing experience with the computer teacher, Mahmud was otherwise well-adjusted at school, doing well academically and also excelling in a range of sports. She enjoyed all games except netball, which she found too 'girly'. Most of all, she enjoyed cricket. Although there was no cricket for girls in school, she improvised. At home, any willing cook, driver, chowkidar or errand boy would be recruited into the cause and a serious game with a proper cricket ball would begin. Above all, she wanted some satisfying competition. The passion continued into practical life, and for many years a bat, ball and set of wickets would be part of her office paraphernalia.

For her Bachelor's degree at Kinnaird, she studied literature, philosophy and journalism. When asked how that fits in with her computer expertise, Sabeen Mahmud simply shrugs off any attempt at categorisation. "I'm not

a computer engineer,” she says quite forcefully. “I’m a generalist.” Her self-description notwithstanding, when she returned to Karachi after her BA, she joined the computing industry once again and felt as if she had never left.

For a while she worked at a company called Enabling Technologies, where she was involved in pioneering multimedia work, which included producing some of the first multimedia CDs in Pakistan. Before long, though, she was back at Solutions Unlimited and convinced her friend and company head Zaheer Kidvai that she could make the business more profitable. Mahmud did succeed, but in the process acquired distaste for money and the corrosive effect it had on human behaviour. “Exchange of money is inevitably a dirty game, in which everyone oppresses everyone else.” she says.

Mahmud says her biggest dream is to change the world for the better through the Internet, through design, and through other communication technologies. The T2F is part of that dream, but in an oblique way. It is a channel to weave debate, dialogue, music, literature, cinema and social commentary into her activism, which ultimately drives her.

She has created a non-profit umbrella called PeaceNiche to lay out the broad scope of her aims, with T2F as the NGO’s first major project. These days, T2F consumes most of her time. It’s a hectic schedule, she says, involving everything from fund-raising, organisation, and upkeep to building maintenance, inventory, and event management. Her tone betrays complaint, but you can see that even if she is complaining, it is with undisguised pleasure about the exhilaration of her work.

I’m running on adrenaline, Sabeen Mahmud says. There’s a lot of horrible stuff going on in this world. You can’t rest until you know you’ve done all you could to try and make things better. It sounds like she has encapsulated her overriding motivation, but Mahmud corrects the conjecture. It’s much more than that, she responds. It’s our collective moral obligation.