

BRIEF REPORT ON SHAB-E SHE'R (POETRY NIGHT), CANADA

By Bānoo Zan

I landed in Canada in 2010 as an immigrant. Within a month after my landing, I started attending poetry events and soon found out that events have boundaries along age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion (or lack thereof!), poetic voice and style of performance, and a host of other lines. These criteria keep the in-group together, but indirectly exclude the outsiders. And so it happens that, despite the active presence of almost all communities in the arts, seldom do we come across a voice that can claim it is the voice of all “Canada” or “Toronto”. Multiculturalism is practiced as cultural ghettoization and separation. Despite the fact that we like to taste ethnic food, we’d rather participate in literary events where we hear ourselves. We like to listen to one another’s music, visit one another’s restaurants and watch one another dance. But that is about all we like to know about the other. When the other starts speaking out and sharing their concerns about their experiences, we miss the references and stop listening. . .

As a Muslim woman from the Middle East, Iran, I see that this separation has led to perpetration of cultural stereotypes even among the intelligentsia. The newcomers are encouraged to stay within their communities and not to venture out. There is very little help out there for a person who wants to break free from the little ethnic empires within Toronto and have a truly international audience and network. But, to me, if there is ever going to be a truly Canadian literature emerging, it has to have traces of all literary cultures that exist on its soil. To help facilitate the emergence of a new literary movement that speaks for and to all of us, we need to venture out of our closed claustrophobic circles. And that is why Shab-e She’r (Poetry Night) was started.

There are many challenges on this path. The first and most important of them is to help members of each poetry community overcome their sense of insecurity and attend the most diverse poetry series in Toronto, to let go of the strong sense of security they experience with people like themselves and be a bit more adventurous. I still haven't reached all communities, and I need the help of each and every one who believes in this dream of joining people together.

The other challenge I have faced is finding group members with a strong sense of commitment to the group, who prioritize the materializing of the group goals to anything else that might be going on in their lives. I have more help now that I had when I started. Jeannine Pitas, Dagmar Morgan and Kate Marshall Flaherty are the incredible team members whose support has proved invaluable. Still, we need more help now than when I started, simply because the group has expanded and is reaching more people. So, here I put out my call for group members who wish to make Toronto literary scene as diverse as its streets. We need poets who believe in the vision of the group to join as team members, in any capacity they wish. We need people to help with social media, working the door, writing grants applications, set-up and close-up, hosting, and photography.

I don't want the series to be dominated by any one group or voice, or just by a few of them. I want us to be us – truly, with all our hearts, words and actions. I believe in solidarity among artists and poets. That is how we can claim our leadership role in a world dominated by politics and help ourselves and others grow to full potential.

Please consider joining Shab-e She'r (Poetry Night) Facebook group and/or following us on Twitter. And if you believe in what we do, please help spread the word.

Thank you,

Bänoo Zan

@BanooZan

@ShabeSherTO

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/poetry.gallery.toronto/>

Bio:

Poet, translator, teacher, editor and poetry organizer Bānoo Zan has been writing poetry since the age of ten and has published more than 80 poems, translations, biographies, and articles. Two books of her poetry are due to be released in 2015 and 2016. She is the founder, and an organizer and host of Shab-e She'r (Poetry Night), the most diverse of its kind in Toronto. For more than two years, Shab-e She'r has been bridging the gap between diverse poetry communities, bringing together people from different ethnicities, nationalities, ages, disabilities, religions (or lack thereof), genders, sexual orientations, poetic styles, voices and visions.

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