

Letter from NEW YORK

Sara Suleri Goodyear, a Pakistani Yale English professor, became well-known among the South Asian academic/literary circles for writing *Meatless Days*, a tribute to her mother; her just-published *Boys Will Be Boys: a daughter's elegy* -- a title her father had wanted to use for his own autobiography -- is intended as an elegy to the founder of The Times of Karachi and the Evening Times. Our own Anjum Niaz travelled from New York to Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, to listen to a reading of the book by the author.

It's an elegy, this time for her beloved 'Pip', (short for 'patriotic and preposterous'), the father Sara Suleri never let the reader of *Meatless Days* forget: his pedestrian English accent; his irascibility with his brood of six ("You tended to chide us before we were children"). The English professor at Yale had gripped us with the cold-blooded murder of the fairest of all, Ifat, her sister, ("she dies inside me daily") and the hit-and-run death of her Welsh mother: Surraya Mair Suleri, daughter of John Amos Jones, by a rickshaw at Punjab University where she, like her daughter, taught English and was adored by her students. ("I think each of us died in some way the day they buried Mamma").

Privy to the most intimate memories of the Suleri household embedded in the golden era of Lahore, "Oh, City of Lights, the grave-homes of our mother, sister and now our father", Sara engaged us in the social fabric of the 60's and 70's woven around the changing seasons and her father's blind devotion to 'General Zulu' Haq: "You were quite chummy with that maniacal general".

A decade and two years later, there she is, in the dimly-lit corridor of Yale, walking flat-footed along in her black patent flats burdened by the endlessly flowing *kurta* a rich silk Wedgwood, blue stripes worn with a loosely fitted *chooridar* and a scarf carefully clutching her shoulders but girlishly pushed away. Her characteristic bob, parted in the middle, still drapes the sad face. Walking like a "sated crab...not the old Sara of yore, fleet of foot and sure of step", mourns Tillat, the youngest, at

her sister's sorry sight.

Sara starts to read and opens the first chapter of her new book, *Boys will be Boys: A Daughter's Elegy*, hot from the University of Chicago Press. It's a title that had been jokingly chosen by Z.A. Suleri (Z.A.S.) for his own planned but unwritten autobiography. The prominent political journalist-turned-editor died in 1999. He had been 86.

Sara's voice cracks as she recites Ghalib, Iqbal and many more during the next one hour, narrating nuggets from randomly picked pages packed in a graveyard of memories. The 13 chapters, prefixed always by an Urdu couplet: "Pip who loved Ghalib with a passion typical to his nature" are enticingly crafted around her family with ZAS as the chief protagonist.

Deathlike silence prevails in the small room where Sara Suleri Goodyear, 50, celebrates the life and times of her father. "When Pip died, I moaned. I thought some remnant in me had been discarded." As if to make amends for the fun she poked at him, cruelly taking the wind out of his pompous sails in *Meatless Days*, the daughter now wants to make her peace. "On Judgment Day, I will say to God, 'Be merciful, for I have already been judged by my child'," ZAS would chide her.

But her rendition is inaudible, poorly constructed. She appears in pain, her face distorted, lips puckered, head bent, shoulders sagging. Sara halts often as she turns the pages and stumbles over sentences once too often. Her vocal chords give out, she whispers hoarsely while attempting to mouth words. A glass of water is pushed

sympathetically towards her to salve her tortured delivery.

"Whatever continents may intrude to interrupt our narrative, the circle of life only seems to grow tighter and tighter," she continues.

Is her inside weeping? Her heart tearing? Her soul grieving? None dare fidget. The crowd is mostly Indian.

On Indo-Pak war and liberation of Bangladesh in, Sara says philosophically: "I watched you, Pip, during the bitter war of 1971. It take me much time to mention that war because of its colossal failures, its unutterable consumption of lives. I am not sorry Bangladesh is in place it was a stupid idea, anyway, to have an east wing and a west wing of Pakistan, separated by a thousand-odd miles of enemy territory, like a bird without a body."

Sara well remembers how they had collected funds for cyclone victims in the erstwhile East Pakistan. Nuzzi, her sister, had a cook from Bengal who "told me that the last time he returned to Bangladesh there was another enormous upheaval in the Ganges. Uprooting villages, wreaking havoc where havoc should not have been wreaked. He said he and his family spent days clinging to some trees... I felt ashamed."

Sara reads a letter from the son of Pothan Joseph, explaining (as if her audience knows!) "He (P. Joseph), as a former editor of *Dawn*, had written to me a gently chiding letter. *Dawn* was not founded in Karachi, as apparently I had claimed when my father was his father's sub-editor. Mr Joseph proceeded to describe Pip's quirks and intensities, all too well known to me. He



Homi K. Bhabha with Sara Suleri at Yale reading (photo taken by A. Niaz)



concluded this letter from Bombay by writing charmingly, 'Please excuse my pookish manner' and had the sweetness of soul to seek out and send me pictures of Pip when he first worked at *Dawn*."

"When I looked at the

photographs of that young man with a face disturbingly like my own I knew that if I did not love him already, I would until God's heavenly Muslim universe had descended and taken him from me for good."

But she quickly sets the record straight: "A saddening thought. But you were, Pip, always exuberant about your editorials and your articles, even when you did them everyday."

When all's over, I walk away, silent, a trifle triumphant over the Yalewallahs: I consider Sara's discourse my intellectual property right solely as a Pakistani first and a Lahori second. I saw it happen. "She looks so *dukhi* (sad)" says the young Nandini as we walk out together. Her male companion, another Indian student, has specially come to hear Sara, but leaves disappointed. "Maybe she's not well... it seems that she didn't really

want to be here."

Read the book! That's what I did and could not lay it down. "A Proust in Pakistan, to wander among her own several lives" now gives us a rare peep into the secret life of Pip - a man with human frailties, never mind his self-righteousness.

The aging and ailing Lion, as Sara calls her father, "adopts" Shahida in the twilight of his life. The woman crude and scheming according to Sara's accounts - worked in the advertising section of *The Pakistan Times* where ZAS was the big boss. She came howling with a complaint of sexual harassment. Not only is the alleged abuser (innocent of the crime) summarily kicked out, but "Pip came home with his blushing daughter", giving Sara and her siblings a "stepsister"!

Sara tantalizes the reader with the ambivalent relationship between the young woman and her father. We're told how Shahida takes over the life and home of Pip, who badly needed a "companion" and allows this peroxide blonde with a generous bosom to ransack their home throw "Mamma's china" out, put up shiny, cheap curtains, get rid of the gold nib Parker and Mont Blanc that "Papa" loved to write with. Shahida even accompanies him to New York during a UN session and stays grandly at the UN Plaza!

"After you had left, Pip, stepsister Shahida began pestering each of us for 'portorn!', until they finally figured out what the Punjabi wench wanted was a power of attorney to keep ZAS's Lahore house where she's set up a Z.A Suleri Trust Foundation and

appointed herself the president!

Sara regales us with her tale of "Scorch & Soda" (Scotch) that ZAS enjoyed furtively and loved eating "meat sausages" who cares if they had a bit of pork! "Get rid of the sausages! Hide the sausages!" Pip would bellow to his kids when some "religious-looking visitors turned up" at the hospital in London where ZAS was admitted.

As for politics: there was "Bobby Shafto (Nawaz Sharif) fat and fair with his Model Town estates and innumerable mills of corruption"; while Benazir Bhutto "promised some hope until she married her scoundrel." Sara abbreviates "Paki" for Pakistan and "Mozzies" for Muslims throughout the book. They make for an easy read, so why quibble?

"Ifat wore rings, just as I do". Sara can say that again: I have a hard time counting the number of glittering baubles covering eight fingers as she tentatively turns the pages while reading from them.

"Yes Pip, he (Austin) is still my husband...you see me married, domesticated," Sara addresses her father and recounts her marriage to a widower; a millionaire, a Goodyear (the tyre man); double in age, with a daughter "older than I am...I leaptfrogged to become a step-great grandmother". Austin Goodyear owns a yacht called "Mermaid" and a farmhouse in Maine. "Sara, make him a Muslim", urges ZAS from afar.

"Goddamn it, son of a bitch (Austin's favourite refrain) was Pip's most mouthed words. Z.A.S, my father, has a certain uncanny connection with A.G.

my spouse," even though the two never met.

Who won't remember Abdul Ali Khan - "a feudal gentleman if ever there was one" as the principal of Aitchison College. Well, the tyrant expelled Shahid (Sara's brother) for writing "libelous and obscene lyrics" about his various teachers. Pip called, over the phone, called him a "bull and a pig" when he refused to take Shahid back.

And Zeno -- *Dawn's* most respected columnist: "would send poisoned darts at Pip and Pip would send them back at Zeno".

"What was it about Pip's relationship to friends?" asks the daughter who cannot "recall a single of his friendships that was not somehow trammelled by history." Of his cousins, "Uncle", Shamim and his younger brother Nasim, the journalist who later became Pakistan's ambassador to the UN, "Pip" never saw eye to eye.

"Pip, your handwriting still can wrench me as your Quran (that ZAS gave when Sara left for the US in 1976) has traveled with me -- and will forever -- from home to home."

"Ifat-Tillat-Nuzhat-Sara", ZAS would yell and each of his daughters would come running: "If possible we would still be running to his side today."

Except Ifat and Nuzhat are dead, and so is 'Pip'.

"Good night, sweet Pip, flights of angels sing thee to thy rest! You will be back more times than you know. I was always obstinate," thus ends a daughter's elegy, *Boys will be Boys*.

Anjum Niaz is a US-based correspondent for the Dawn newspaper of Pakistan.

'Me? I thought, OBE me? Up yours, I thought'

British Rasta poet, radio commentator and all-round activist Benjamin Zephaniah was shortlisted for Oxford Professor of Poetry, and in 1999 was a strong contender for Poet Laureate. Born in Birmingham in 1958, Zephaniah grew up in Jamaica and then returned to the UK. His work draws upon his own native patter, comic stories and rhymes. His full name is Benjamin Obaidiah Iqbal Zephani. This year Benjamin was invited to the palace to be awarded an Order of the British Empire by the queen--an honour for which most Bangladeshi politicians, civil/public servants, artists, writers and performers would no doubt be willing to behave in a most disorderly fashion--but declined. Here is his funny and impassioned piece detailing why.

---Editor, Literature Page

I woke up on the morning of November 13 wondering how the government could be overthrown and what could replace it, and then I noticed a letter from the prime minister's office. It said: "The prime minister has asked me to inform you, in strict confidence, that he has in mind, on the occasion of the forthcoming list of New Year's honours to submit your name to the Queen with a recommendation that Her Majesty may be graciously pleased to approve that you be appointed an officer of the Order of the British Empire."

Me? I thought, OBE me? Up yours, I thought. I get angry when I hear that word "empire"; it reminds me of slavery, it reminds of thousands of years of brutality, it reminds me of how my foremothers were raped and my forefathers brutalised. It is because of this concept of empire that my British education led me to believe that the history of black people started with slavery and that we were born slaves, and should therefore be grateful that we were given freedom by our caring white masters. It is because of this idea of empire that black people like myself don't even know our true names or our true historical culture. I am not one of those who are obsessed with their roots, and I'm certainly not suffering from a crisis of identity; my obsession is about the future and the political rights of all people. Benjamin Zephaniah OBE - no way Mr Blair, no way Mrs Queen. I am profoundly anti-empire.

There's something very strange about receiving a letter from Tony Blair's office asking me if I want to accept this award. In the past couple of months I've been on Blair's doorstep a few times. I have begged him to come out and meet me; I have been longing for a conversation with him, but he won't come out, and now here he is asking me to meet him at the palace! I was there with a million people on February 15, and the last time I was there was just a couple of weeks ago. My cousin, Michael Powell, was arrested and taken to Thornhill Road police station in Birmingham where he died. Now, I know how he died. The whole of Birmingham knows how he died, but in order to get this article published and to be politically (or journalistically) correct, I have to say that he died in suspicious circumstances. The police will not give us any answers. We have not seen or heard anything of all the reports and investigations we were told were going to take place. Now, all that my family can do is join with all the other families who have lost members while in custody because no one in power is listening to us. Come on Mr Blair, I'll meet you anytime. Let's talk about your Home Office, let's talk about being tough on crime.

This OBE thing is supposed to be for my services to literature, but there are a whole lot of writers who are better than me, and they're not involved in the things

that I'm involved in. All they do is write; I spend most of my time doing other things. If they want to give me one of these empire things, why can't they give me one for my work in animal rights? Why can't they give me one for my struggle against racism? What about giving me one for all the letters I write to innocent people in prisons who have been framed? I may just consider accepting some kind of award for my services on behalf of the millions of people who have stood up against the war in Iraq. It's such hard work - much harder than writing poems.

And hey, if Her Majesty may be graciously pleased to lay all that empire stuff on me, why can't she write to me herself. Let's cut out the middleman - she knows me. The last time we met, it was at a concert I was



Benjamin Zephaniah with Vikram Seth

hosting. She came backstage to meet me. That didn't bother me; lots of people visit my dressing room after performances. Me and the South African performers I was working with that night thought it rather funny that we had a royal groupie. She's a bit stiff but she's a nice old lady. Let me make it clear: I have nothing against her or the royal family. It is the institution of the monarchy that I loathe so very much, the monarchy that still refuses to apologise for sanctioning slavery.

There is a part of me that hopes that after writing this article I shall never be considered as a Poet Laureate or an OBE sucker again. Let this put an end to it. This may lose me some of my writing friends; some people may never want to work with me again, but the truth is I think OBEs compromise writers and poets, and laureates suddenly go soft - in the past I've even written a poem, *Bought and Sold*, saying that.

There are many black writers who love OBEs, it makes them feel like they have made it. When it suits them, they embrace the struggle against the ruling class and the oppression they visit upon us, but then they join the oppressors' club. They are so easily seduced into the great house of Babylon known as the palace. For them, a wonderful time is meeting the

Queen and bowing before her presence.

I was shocked to see how many of my fellow writers jumped at the opportunity to go to Buckingham Palace when the Queen had her "meet the writers day" on July 9 2002, and I laughed at the pathetic excuses writers gave for going. "I did it for my mum"; "I did it for my kids"; "I did it for the school"; "I did it for the people", etc. I have even heard black writers who have collected OBEs saying that it is "symbolic of how far we have come". Oh yes, I say, we've struggled so hard just to get a minute with the Queen and we are so very grateful - not.

I've never heard of a holder of the OBE openly criticising the monarchy. They are officially friends, and that's what this cool Britannia project is about. It gives OBEs to cool rock stars, successful business-women and blacks who would be militant in order to give the impression that it is inclusive. Then these rock stars, successful women, and ex-militants write to me with the OBE after their name as if I should be impressed. I'm not. Quite the opposite - you've been had.

Writers and artists who see themselves as working outside the establishment are constantly being accused of selling out as soon as they have any kind of success. I've been called a sell-out for selling too many books, for writing books for children, for performing at the Royal Albert Hall, for going on Desert Island Discs, and for appearing on the Parkinson show. But I want to reach as many people as possible without compromising the content of my work.

What continues to be my biggest deal with the establishment must be my work with the British Council, of which, ironically, the Queen is patron. I have no problem with this. It has never told me what to say, or what not to say. I have always been free to criticise the government and even the council itself. This is what being a poet is about. Most importantly, through my work with the council I am able to show the world what Britain is really about in terms of our arts, and I am able to partake in the type of political and cultural intercourse which is not possible in the mainstream political arena. I have no problem representing the reality of our multiculturalism, which may sometimes mean speaking about the way my cousin Michael died in a police station. But then, I am also at ease letting people know that our music scene is more than what they hear in the charts, and that British poetry is more than Wordsworth, or even Motion (current poet laureate). I have no problem with all of this because this is about us and what we do. It is about what happens on the streets of our country and not in the palace or at No 10.

Me, OBE? Whoever is behind this offer can never have read any of my work. Why don't they just give me some of those great African works of art that were taken in the name of the empire and let me return them to their rightful place? You can't fool me, Mr Blair. You want to privatise us all; you want to send us to war. You stay silent when we need you to speak for us, preferring to be the voice of the US. You have lied to us, and you continue to lie to us, and you have poured the working-class dream of a fair, compassionate, caring society down the dirty drain of empire. Stick it, Mr Blair - and Mrs Queen, stop going on about the empire. Let's do something else.

From the Online Guardian

To Some Foreign News Reporters

ABUL HOSSAIN
(translated by Abid Anwar)



Mr. Porter, how to convey my thanks to you!

You hurried

(took a few bananas, two to three Cokes,

and three cups of tepid tea),

from far, across continents and oceans, from the States to this small poor land just for news.

How nice are your newspapers

I can't but applaud this effort of yours.

ignoring mosquito bites at night the pictures of famine you snapped from every nook and corner of Kurigram could make us all mute and dumb, and so did your clear, bold and neutral prose. How wonderfully fine was that report! Those skeletal, naked and bloated corpses looked quite harrowing in the pages of *Le Monde*

But nothing more could you see in this land?

Senor Gourdini, whence you came, Madrid or Rome? Your face covered with beard, a leather jacket and high boots did you say? Maybe a tourist you are That notebook in hand marked you right. Have you no fear? The riot has emptied all villages and towns Nooks and corners are full of corpses, alarmed people are vacating their homes with their hands broken, legs chopped, bandages on heads;

From high above the sky, from the hired chopper, you yourself looked down below at the turbid flood devouring mile after mile; when you landed, you rushed to send wires, wires after wires, how keen those narrations were added with pictures, all those heart-rending photos you took! You have vision, Mr. Porter, how forceful a pen you wield, as if from the very pages of papers the flood would swallow us with its wide-open mouth.

But nothing more could you see in this land?

Madam La Pierre How tolerant could you be? From the glittery world of Paris you flew, then rushed about three hundred miles from Dhaka in a shiny car, crossing all those bright-looking ferries, often on foot, sometimes riding a rickety rickshaw (in the mud and dust how wretched your bright red jeans had been), starved a full night, one-and-a-half day

and amidst that scene you point by point do so discourse with workers of *Anjuman-i-Mahfil-Islam*, from a Red Cross car you stepped towards the streets and lanes all soaked with blood and tears, moved around the burnt houses, desolate shops. The reports you sent to your paper the whole country did read and cry: For shame! How brutal and barbaric!