



WOMEN ON THE MOVE

Lucky Breaks

An interview with drama artist Lucky Enam

by Gemini Wahhaj

Lucky Enam has been highly prolific in Bangladeshi theater. Besides acting in some of the most highly acclaimed Dhaka plays, she has directed and written plays also. The actress started her stage career with Nagorik Nattayampraday, one of the prominent theater groups in Dhaka. But recently, she, along with a few other actors, split off from Nagorik Nattayampraday to form their own theater group, Nagorik Nattayangan. The actress met with The Daily Star to discuss her new group, opportunities for women in Bangladesh theater, and children's drama. She also gave us a good pulse on the Dhaka theater scene.

DS: So how did Nagorik Nattayangan come about?
I think I should give you a little background. Actually, a group called Nagorik Nattayampraday was founded in 1968 with the TV production of Oedipus. Their first stage production was in 1972. I joined in 1972, as the first female member.

DS: You were the first woman to join?
I was the first woman member. There were no other female members then. Others joined later. Anyway, you may ask why, after so many years, in 1995, this group has split off into 2 Nagoriks. You may say that we differed on some basic issues, regarding drama, acting, etc. The sentiment was that not everyone can write and direct natak. I acknowledge that. But only a handful of senior members were directing, etc. The rest of us, who'd been involved with Nagorik right from the start, who'd brought so many great natak to the stage, for example Nuruddin Shara Jibon, were deprived from major roles, the chance to produce.

So a few of us senior members felt that we were wasting our time. Life is so short, don't you think? If I can't use my time effectively, then I think it's useless, a waste. A crime. I have the confidence that I can do something well, but I

with which we self-founded Nagorik. Everything shall remain the same, except we shall work a little differently. Within one month we brought out a production, and by now we've had a few shows. And hopefully, if we can keep this same speed and spirit, Insha Allah, we shall be successful.

DS: What will be different about your Nagorik?
Different? Hmm. Take the word group theater. There should be no dictatorship. All the members form a family. There should be mutual respect and regard. Don't you agree? That's what we tried to foster in our Nagorik. We've taken some new members — the young generation. We've taken them in with love, and they respect us. We hope to involve them all in future productions.

DS: When you started acting and black eyes, were all signs of vicious beatings. He did not like her coming to the centre, as he believed that the women there were of bad character, although she badly needed the money. "Even if I do stop coming here, he will find some other reason to beat me up. He has been beating me for so long now, that I don't even resent it any longer." She continued, and eventually became a member of our women's samity, taking part in all kinds of income generating activities, such as earthwork, road construction etc.

I did not see her for nearly two years, but I was informed one day that she had lost her son. When I met her soon afterwards, I found her busy with work. She worked continuously, as if she had turned into a machine. She replied that it was her work that helped her to get through each day. "If I stay at home, I will simply suffocate." With that, she revealed for the first time the depth of the loneliness that plagued her.

DS: Why did you start acting self here. I've already written an adaptation of Begum Rokeya's Sultana's Dream for Mohila Parishad. I also directed and acted in it. Different women from different theater groups act in this natak, on special occasions. We enjoy it a lot.

I think that women in our country should write. Because women can really write with a lot of feeling about issues that are very personal to us. They can present our general problems.

you were the only female member of your group. How was that? What was it like then, being a female actress?
I'd just passed my SSC then. From childhood, I've been raised in such a family, that there was always dancing, singing, poetry recitation going on in the house. I've been performing on stage since age three. We used to all learn to sing together. Singing teachers, dance instructors, were always coming to our house. Then, my father was very interested in these things also. Therefore, I'd been practising these things since I was a child. So at one stage, I became addicted, I wanted to do natak. And then, I became involved with such a man, that I've been living in this natak circle since then!

When I started, Nagorik needed a female character in a play Buro shaliker ghare rog (Michael Madhusadhan). So they were looking then, who'd do the female character. Then they found me. And I also found my link, you could say, with the natak world.

DS: So what was it like then?
In 1972, there were really no problems. It was really very free. It was fantastic in 1972. It was right after liberation. The atmosphere was very different then. In fact, I think now women don't get as much opportunity. I don't remember any badha from anywhere. Everyone, including my family, was very excited.

DS: Were there women in other groups as well at the time?
Yes. Ferdousi apa was with Theater. Then Shuborna was with Dhaka theater.

DS: And what was the role of women in theater then?
Were you limited? Could you write a play, or direct if you wanted to? How is the situation now?
I was too young in 1972. But now, among those who're writing for the stage (you could say there are no female writers at all for the stage), I want to create a space for my

DS: Are you involved with children's drama as well?
I've written three children's productions up to now. I think this is a very neglected field, very neglected. Our children have to speak adult lines when they act. A few days before the last Eid, there was a children's drama festival at Shishu Academy. I was one of the judges. But, in watching the natak, I realised that there are no good children's natak. No-one's writing for

them. No-one's writing genuine shishu natak, in which children can act in their own way.

I plan to write several children's plays and publish a book. If you don't publish plays, then the general public doesn't have access, all over the country. Someone has encouraged me also. He said write the book, I'll publish it for you.

DS: How about funny plays?
Well, I think children's plays should be funny. They'll enjoy them. Funny plays in Bangladesh means Humayun Ahmed. He has that wit. He may be able to write good children's plays. Also Nazma Jasmine Chowdhury has a few children's plays. These are the ones that children usually perform. Also, Indian plays like b-j-b-r-l.

DS: Is the theater world [in Bangladesh] alive, exciting?
It used to be till very recently. Just recently, it's been a little strange.

DS: How would you rate the theater-going scene in Dhaka?
I think it's good. There are

so many groups, so many dramas. How would that be possible without a good audience? People say we get the same audience every night, but that can't be true. I think our audience is increasing.

But it's sad that our theaters aren't improving. There's no air-conditioning even. People don't watch dramas for fear of the heat. We had two shows at the British Council, and the house was full! Why? Because there was air-conditioning. It takes Tk. 25,000-60,000

to launch a production. To break even we want to show as many plays as possible. So we need a bigger theater-going crowd, more halls, better halls, etc.

DS: What are Nagorik Nattayangan's plans for the future?
We shall work in our own group, and then also work with other groups. I mean, we must keep the whole theater angan alive. We should all share. This 'I'm the star' mentality should vanish.

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Women in Television

Making Women's Roles a Lightweight Issue

By Shaheen Anam

With improved communication with the rest of the world, meaning our access to BBC, CNN, ZEE TV, Star Plus etc. we are now getting a first hand view of life in other parts of the world. Lately I have been looking at programmes through the gender lenses and what I see is not at all encouraging. Unfortunately, most of the Television programmes has been very slow to catch up with the changes that have been taking place in society in relation to women. It continues to perpetuate myths and stereo typed images of women and in fact assists to further the existing status quo of the male dominated society. Often it is behind time portraying images of women as mothers and housewife whose only aim in life is to dedicate her life to the service of the family or as super, sexy paragons of beauty constantly enticing men. The reality for most women is somewhere in between. Women in most part of the world have come far beyond that image, but most television programmes seems to have missed the point completely.

What has surprised me most is the lack of seriousness with which Television often deals with important women's issues such as women's role in society, domestic violence and legal rights of women. In some drama series the women's movement is often depicted as some kind of activity that a group of bored housewives from middle class homes are undertaking in order to pass their time. The struggle for empowerment and emancipation is portrayed as some kind of a joke where women refuse to cook on holidays or demand extra spending money.

The struggle and triumphs of the women's movement is rarely reflected in their programmes. This is not to say that Television does not have special and excellent programmes for women. To name a few the ZEE TV programme "Shakti" is a thought provoking programme highlighting critical day to day issues that women face. Bangladesh Television has aired some good programmes such as Ain Adalat, etc. I do not remember seeing anything very gender sensitive on Star Television, on the other hand some of the programmes are out and out demeaning portraying women as sex objects, especially in the advertisements which are aired.

As the women's movement has gained strength over the years one of the strong recommendations has been for a positive image of Women in the Media. The media, both in the West and in Developing Countries stand guilty of portraying an image of women which is neither real nor complementary. International Conferences on Women has time and again made recommendations to stop portraying the existing

skewed image of women. The soap series which are shown on Star Plus is a disgrace and a mockery to average Western or American women. Devoid of support from the extended family, the average Western woman's life is a constant struggle to juggle family and professional demands. They seldom have time to frolic away their time in idleness going from one love affair to another.

The drama series in Bangladesh and Indian Television are no better. In these dramas, women are often depicted as vulnerable dependent, and prone to irrationality. I was especially disappointed to watch a humorous series on Zee Television in which domestic violence was being treated with a kind of callousness that can give very wrong signals in societies which traditionally has been slow in reacting to domestic violence. The scene is of a domestic maid who comes to work with bruises all over her face. Seeing this the eldest daughter of the family decides to start a movement demanding compensation for the abuse. The message of the episode is that when two people live together there is bound to be fights and just because the husband beats up his wife once in a while does not mean that he does not love her! In other words it perpetuates the common belief that domestic violence is a familial problem, should be resolved within the family and outsiders should not interfere with it. In other instances women are made to choose between a career or family and if she chooses the first then she is somehow made to pay for it by giving up her marriage or children.

The importance of the media in women's struggle for emancipation and empowerment cannot be overstated. Most of the discrimination towards women in our society is due to age old perceptions and attitudes that needs to be changed to bring about a positive change in the lives of women, be it rights within the family or outside. The media can play a pivotal role in this respect because it molds public opinion.

Given the many talented playwrights in our part of the world, somebody could surely write a drama series which portrays the real lives of women as homemakers, mothers and professionals. Perhaps a series where women are not punished for wanting a career and a family too. Women can be shown not only as weak and vulnerable but instead as strong, capable, yet loving and caring homemakers. I am not inferring that Television has never portrayed a positive image of women, all I am saying is that more and more of this should be the norm so that we may begin to see its positive impact in our day to day lives.

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Lily Begum of Rasulpur

by Rokeya Rahman Kabeer

abuse, Lily Begum has at least been strong enough to make the men pay for it." I could see that our staff members were really ashamed of their irresponsible and unsympathetic behaviour. But what other reaction could I have expected from them? Our middle and lower middle class girls had been brainwashed into thinking that prostitutes were social untouchables, sub-human creatures. But why exactly does a woman resort to selling her body? Who and what leads her into it as questions that are never even asked. Yet when men visit prostitutes, people invariably view it indulgently.

Two years later, I came to know that Lily Begum had married an eighty year old man, who already had a wife, several grown-up children and

whom I used to call "uncle" and begged him to marry me, just to save me from what I was going through every night. His wife was a very kind woman. She persuaded him to marry me.

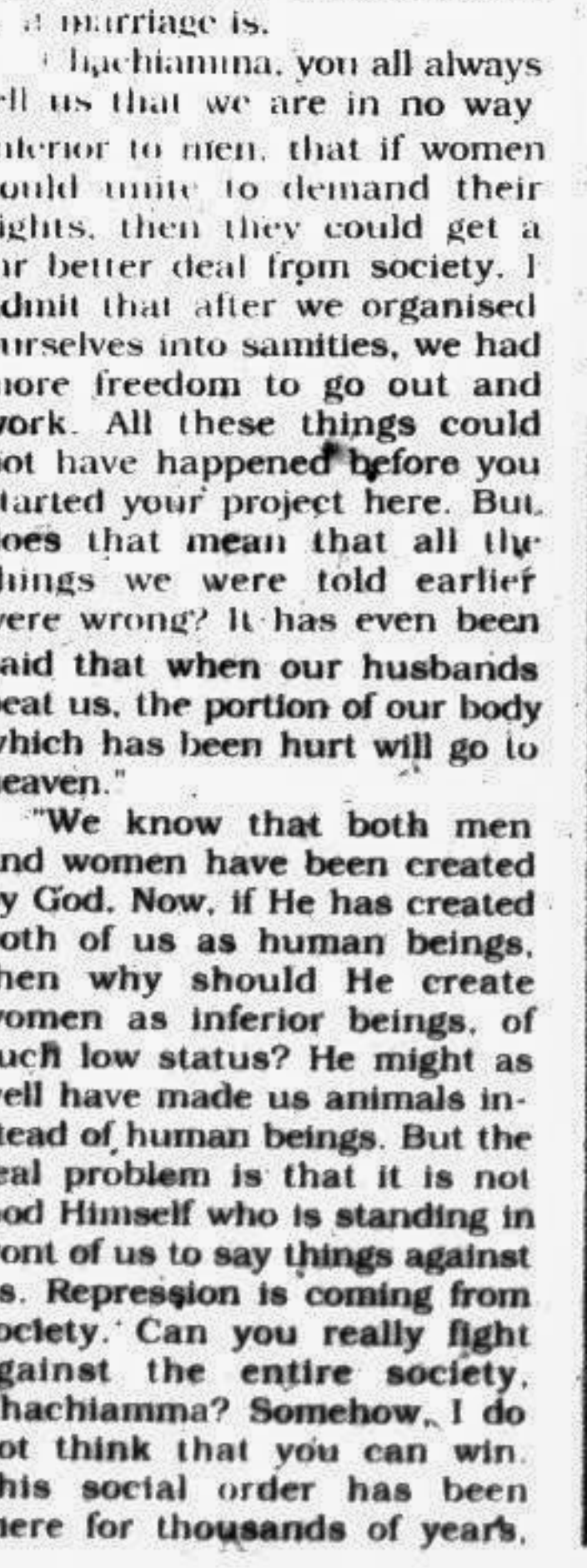
But it was decided that Belayat Ali could not look after me, or could he live with me, as he has his own family. I have been looking after myself for a long time, so I didn't need his money. The arrangement suited me fine, as long as people believed that we are married. What really matters, is that now I have a husband. That is more than enough. I don't face those young hooligans raiding my house at night anymore. Yet my door is still tied with the same sort of rope as before. The only change is that now I am a married woman, with a husband. It does not matter how tenuous a marriage is.

Bachamma, you all always tell us that we are in no way inferior to them; that if women could unite to demand their rights, then they could get a far better deal from society. I admit that after we organised ourselves into sanities, we had more freedom to go out and work. All these things could not have happened before you started your project here. But, does that mean that all the things we were told earlier were wrong? It has even been said that when our husbands beat us, the portion of our body which has been hurt will go to heaven.

"We know that both men and women have been created by God. Now, if He has created both of us as human beings, then why should He create women as inferior beings, of such low status? He might as well have made us animals instead of human beings. But the real problem is that it is not God Himself who is standing in front of us to say things against us. Repression is coming from society. Can you really fight against the entire society, Chachamma? Somehow, I do not think that you can win. This social order has been there for thousands of years,

like an old banyan tree that has stretched its roots deep into the earth. Storms will not be able to uproot it. The only way is to cut the tree down. Can you do that?" Although illiterate and uninformed by accepted standards, Lily Begum was right. The answer to her question haunts me still.

Taken from the book "Seven Women," Edited by Farah Ghuznavi



Sketches from village Life in Bangladesh" by Rokeya Rahman Kabeer of Saptagram Nari Swantirvar Parishad, 1994.

Taken from the book "Seven Women," Edited by Farah Ghuznavi

