

criticism

Razia Khan Amin's Poetry: A Brief Critique

by Rebecca Haque

RAZIA Khan Amin has been, and remains, one of the teachers I admire most. She has been my inspiration, especially during my Master's year when I myself was poised to evolve into what I am today. Her eloquence and vision made me gloriously imbibe the deep mysticism of Whitman — grass, leaves of grass, the "handkerchief of the Lord". She made me sink into Shakespeare so that today I too can translate this great bard for my own students with her facility, ease, and brilliance. How shall I repay my debt to her? I can only bow my head in silent gratitude.

To date, Razia Khan Amin has published two volumes of poetry in English — *Argus Under Anaesthesia* and *Cruel April* — both under her maiden name Razia Khan and both critically acclaimed and of enduring value. These two volumes of poems reflect Razia Khan's long-standing and intimate relationship with the English language — effervescent, poignant, heart-rending and sublime. Her flawless diction and intuitive knowledge of technique and form make the reading of her poems a delightful exercise in intellectual interaction.

Razia Khan's first book *Argus Under Anaesthesia* came out in June 1976. It contains 35 poems from the period 1960 to the mid-Seventies. Some of these were composed abroad, others during our nation's agonised and protracted War of

Liberation. A few belong to Razia Khan's sojourn in England and Pakistan. In the majority of poems, their titles become epiphanic, instantly taking us to the core and heart of the matter. For example, "One Womb", "To a Pedagogue", "The Grave of Time" and "I Buried You" speak of time, change, love, the poignant loss of love, and the even more poignant rite-of-passage end of adolescence. "I Buried You" (1961) is worth quoting in full:

*I buried you I thought past resurgence
In books and cold looks — in prudence
Drowned you I thought in good sense
I thought I had lost even the pittance
Of watching you with hungry eyes —
Practised in murdering the most
Alive self, I thought I had killed this
Ache so strangely mixed with bliss.
But the corpse revives — despite
The show sustained of reluctant
Lips and brow which in stealth
Adore your eloquent face.
And in bold caresses the ears embrace
The vibrant richness of your velvet
voice.*

The most significant poem in this volume is the title poem "Argus Under Anaesthesia" (1971). In this poem Razia Khan has strongly denounced the bestial oppression of our people during the upheavals of 1971. In it she is recording for posterity the horror of that time:

*A mother frenzied by the roar of
mortars
Throttled her whining infant:
Its life for the life of millions.*



*Bruised feet, bleeding hands;
Dilated eyes enacting the frenzy of
Oedipus.
Corroding thirst dulled
The sense of loss of violated wives,
mothers,
Sisters, butchered babies.*

We Bangladeshis have survived our

*own holocaust.
The second poem "God in a Goblet"
(1972) laments the brutal, gruesome, unforgivable murder of our intellectuals.
Like Argus Under Anaesthesia, this poem too records the poet's violent protest:*

Like proud trees struck down

*By lightning Bengal's glory
Was laid low
In swampy ditches; they are now
Amorphous earth; faces
Erased by arsenic.*

Denunciation and defiance, however, are not enough. Justice is demanded for tyranny and exemplary punishment for the tyrannous.

In 1977, Razia Khan's second volume of poems *Cruel April* was published. This volume contains 23 poems, six of these belong to the "Carmel" series. Written in England during 1959 and 1960, they belong to a rich tradition of Christian symbolic/spiritual/allegorical poetry of which Donne and Herbert are such powerful exponents. Razia Khan is no less powerful. If Donne's heart was "battered" by God, and if Herbert bent his head under the chafing "collar", Razia Khan too gives us an eloquent expression of her own struggle with the flesh and the spirit. "Carmel" refers to the community set up by Prophet Elijah on Mt. Carmel, and this motif becomes symbolic of pilgrimage and spiritual quest. These poems are very personal. In the "Carmel" poems she establishes her position within the tradition and expresses her own spiritual conflict. Therefore in these poems there is a psychological crisis and salvation lies in the possibility of the hereafter:

*The ache remains
Of soft flesh—
Jabbed and torn,
Which forever mends*

*Like the heart
Of Prometheus
Devoured by immortal
Vultures; the agony is cruel,
Like the nails that
Bored holes in the palm of Jesus.
(From, "Towards Mount Carmel",
1960)*

The eponymous poem *Cruel April* is in the form of a dialogue between a man and a woman. The reference to Eliot's *The Wasteland* ("April is the cruellest month") is appropriate since the Razia Khan couple is every bit as anxious and neurotic as the Eliot couple. However, the Razia Khan couple is more sophisticated. Placed in Dhaka towards the end of the 1950s, this couple can allude to Marx, Michealangelo, and Freud. However, they do not have faith in the future, their love is adulterous, and they face the consequences of their illegitimate liaison — guilt and mutual recrimination. Everything is banal, base. In this poem, Razia Khan has given life and palpable form to her imaginary characters. Here lie her power and individuality. Woefully, shamefully, Razia Khan Amin's two volumes of poems have been allowed to go out of print. It is time that they were reprinted so that readers can evaluate and find deep pleasure in the work of this one of the foremost of writers writing in English in Bangladesh today.

About the writer: Rebecca Haque is Associate Professor of English at Dhaka University

interview

Lear Levin's Second Coming

There is an elegant economy about his body. A firm upright torso on a head full of ideas and heart full of love. Indeed, Lear Levin is not merely a curious combination of a name comprising Shakespeare's *King Lear* or the Tolstoyan hero Konstantin Levin but great deal more than that. In fact, he is almost certain to defeat any attempt for novelty in journalistic introduction. With Muktir Gaan breaking new ground every day in the appreciation and acquaintance of thousands of people everyday, Lear Levin, the eloquent, gregarious American who has ensured the real life visual document of our glorious struggle for independence for us and the posterity, hardly needs any introduction. He has already been introduced in so many ways. Particularly his recent visit, second since his first arrival here way back in 1971 was a study in spontaneous introduction, and admiration of this great friend of Bangladesh and its people. Son of a naval officer, Levin was born in Virginia in the November of 1940. Since then it has been a fairly long trek in time. Married happily to Raquel and blessed with a daughter and a son—27-year old Amelia, an interior designer and 24-year old Zachary, a journalist, Levin is 57 now. Clad in a pair of jeans and a tee-shirt he looked smart, strong and smiling to the Daily Star correspondent Chandra Shekhar Das who met him on the day of his departure on completion of his second visit to the country whose birth pangs he and his camera were witness to.

D.S. How did you come to film-making?

L.L. Certainly not by accident. It was the culmination of a whole process of conscious choice. After having finished my school education in Boston, I went to two universities in Pennsylvania and California for higher studies in Cinema. I was actually intent on studying drama but later opted for cinema. Once out of the campus, I was in the services for a while and on my return from there I was without a job for some time. My release from this frustrating spell marked by involvement with film-making. I started doing commercials or ad-films. Even in those early days of a burgeoning career, I felt like doing films that would serve the people. In fact, I have done quite a few public service commercials. I was involved in commercials that helped the people and politicians who were against the Vietnam War. Agencies, people working for distressed man attracted me automatically. That is why I worked for Red Cross, United Way, agencies committed to suffering humanity.

What prompted you to come to this part of the world in 1971?

Well, I was not quite a stranger to this part of the world and its people. Because I had worked to raise fund for the people who were affected by the tidal bore that battered the coasts of the then East Pakistan. My think my emotional attachment with this land and the people began from that point of time. It was very natural of me to be drawn into the great struggle Bangladeshis were engaged in in 1971. Here, I thought I had a subject which I could base a film upon. I was keen on doing something different, something close to my heart. It was part avocation, part altruism that actually stimulated by desire to come here and shoot the struggling millions. It was a big risk in a way because it involved a huge amount of money. And I understand there were and are people who would call it throwing away some 10000 dollars but I knew exactly what I was doing.

DS: Then...

L.L. Then to Calcutta. The officials there were a bit suspicious about the Americans. You could not blame them though. The U.S government's policy was totally contrary to the spirit of the spirit

and end of the struggle. And after a frightening battle with red-tapism, we finally had our passage to Bangladesh.

D.S: You stayed in Bangladesh for six weeks in 1971. Any particular anecdote of that time ...?

L.L: Well, I survived six weeks on cookies that were left over from the the British occupation (laughs) and that was a feat I thought worth mentioning. I will tell you a story. One night we were travelling in a third class compartment on a train along the border between Bangladesh and India. We were with the troupe and they were sleeping. My crew were asleep too. I did not sleep that much during during the whole time there. I was always trying to think what I would do next. And I looked down the train window. There was was a full moon and I was watching it on the body of water that separated India from Bangladesh.

The train was on the Indian side and it was travelling very fast. Pacing up and down I saw all the soldiers, heavily armed and they looked like the Chinese. I guess they were Gurkhas, and I had never seen Gurkhas before. I thought I was either dreaming or the train had passed into China. I am an American you know, and we had this morbid dread of the Chinese because the country was always trying to stir us up against them.

I am talking about the trend in sixties. And here they were so many in number. But they were very friendly. I sat by them and tried to communicate. They showed me their weapons. We were trying to make ourselves understood. The train stopped and I looked out to see the moon on the water again. It was at that time that a very frail, delicate boy dressed completely in white with a staff in his hand boarded the train. He could not have more than 19 years old and he was blind. He looked like a vision from a religious film. He sat beside the soldiers, they made room for him as if they had a sense that he had a special quality. He took a flute out of his white robe began playing upon it. The music was mystical. The only thing I can liken it to is the music I recently heard on a tour we took down to Murapara where Bipul (Bhattacharya) one of the members of the troupe was singing in harmony with the organ. Some said it mystical because it had a special quality to it and it was what Americans expect to hear when they come to the east. The soldiers were overwhelmed. They began to tap out rhythms on their guns. I just thought it was so interesting that here



was this messianic character, almost a child who seemed to have been sent with a mission and it was all happening before my eyes. The contrast between the military and music; the aesthetic and the amrtial quality; and the moon on the water. It was simply overwhelming. It went on for about 45 minutes. Yet I could not record it. Their was not enough light. When the train stopped he got off and disappeared in the night. When everybody woke up I related the incident. But nobody belived me. They said I was telling them something that never happened. But it really happened.

On another occasion, I was among the refugees. My crew and the troupe were also there. The scared, suffering people were crammed in a hut. We would usually shoot by the light of the lantern to get our pictures. And my assistant Frank Gell, a wonderful Englishman who later became a very famous cameraman, was holding the light so that I could photograph the troupe members who were talking, soothing and trying to understand the plight of the the refugees; trying to give them succour. I was photographing and while I was doing this, moths, bugs attacked the lights and began crawling up and down Frank's arms until he was completely covered with them. But I did not see and I also did not know he was petrified of bugs. Not afraid of snakes, not afraid of guns, but bugs: he just could not bear them. I noticed occasionally the started shaking and I yelled God damn! Frank, hold that light steady. You are not in motion, hold that steady. I started teasing him, but I could not see he was covered with bugs, and he was whimpering, and I thought it was a child whimpering because some of the children were at pain. I kept on photographing until I ran out of film. Then I turned around to see that he was covered with bugs. They flew out when the lights were out. Frank just collapsed over the quarter. I went over and embraced him because I thought it was one of the greatest things I had ever seen. He did not stop for one second. I thought that was the character of my friend that came over to help your people

That was guts. That was really guts. And I was very grateful to him for helping me. So in a way they were like you are. They never cried out in pain pain or they never complained no matter what the adversity was and I was very impressed by that. There are many stories of courage. Stories about how impressed I was when I was with the Muktibahini.

One of my favourite subjects that I photographed; a real interesting man he was very tall and he had a bandana wrapped around his head. You know as a camera person I am always compelled by interesting features and faces. He was one of that type. The way he carried his gun over the shoulders. His officer told me that he was sharp shooter. I stayed close to him so that I could see some action. He seemed to me like Laurence Olivier the great actor in the role of Shakespeare's Moore. We used to talk a lot. I was really upset when I heard that he was killed. He died because he was very brave.

D:S Did you let any body use your footage before Masoods came along?

L.L: No. The only purpose the footage ever served was to make the film Muktir Gaan. I gave it to Tareq and Catherine when they approached me 1990. That was the first time people came to know about it. People had wanted the 20 hour footage but I did not give because I did not feel their purposes with that of mine. Essentially they were they were going to be pictures of atrocities and it was not my intention. It was not anything that I dwelt on. It was not, I thought, that reflected your struggle. I was interested in showing your heroism, bravery, determination, and your eloquence and I did not feel images of children in hospitals, you know, anything about negative sense supported the cause. When the Masoods came and spoke to me about their intention, I thought, here I have people who can appreciate my motivation and do justice to my effort. So there they were. Tareq and Catherine who took my footage and transformed it into a soul-stirring document of the lyrical inspiration behind the creation of a nation, of a country. They had to go through great difficulties to piece together, so to speak, the broken images. The time they spent on it is amazing. Even the elephant does not have such a long gestation period. It was awfully long time to be pregnant with an idea.

D:S: What it was like coming to Bangladesh?

L.L: It was simply great. I had no idea what was in store for me when Tareq and Catherine told me about this visit. Specially, the experience of the trip to Murapara is unforgettable. I was simply moved by the love and appreciation people showed for Muktir Gaan. They really made me feel proud for my association with it.