

Non-Fiction

On Death and Loss: Remembering My Mother

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

One of my earliest memories of the mystery of death is my recollection of a story we read in elementary school. In the story, we learned about the reaction of Siddhartha, who later came to be known as Gautam Buddha, when he had a face-to-face encounter with death in Kapilavastu. His father, King Sudhodhono, did not want his son to have to deal with death or human suffering. But Gautam witnessed both, in spite of the king and his courtiers. Since the time I read the story, it has stayed with me, and the manner in which Siddhartha went about on his now legendary quest for the meaning of life and death has always fascinated me. Later I realized that, amongst my friends, like many others growing up in the Indian sub-continent in the 60's and 70's, we had a shared feeling that real search for truth begins only after you witness death or experience love.

My mother passed away last year. I was with her when she breathed her last on the 29th of September at Suhrawardy Hospital, exactly five days after I reached Dhaka with a mission: to be with her and to take care of her during her illness and hopefully, recovery. I was planning to stay on until she had fully recovered or my brother Ratan, who lives in St. Louis, USA, took over and I could pass the baton on to a trusted soul-mate.

Since her death, I too have tried to come to terms with my loss. The loss of a loved one is sometimes hard on any individual, and my mother's absence will be with me for some time to come. I don't say it because I have the power of prediction, but because I know that's how I am wired, as they say, or because I have heard that healing and coping takes time when one is older. But the loss of one's loved ones are meant to hurt no matter when it happens. For example, my cousin Bablu died thirty three years ago, and it feels like only the other day that I saw him ride away on his motorbike from our house in Minto Road and meet into the fateful accident in front of Dhaka Medical College. My eldest brother, Shadani, died, again in a road accident, twenty one years ago in Zimbabwe, and I still



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refer to him as if he were still part of my close inner circle, my band of brothers. I often find myself saying at the dinner table, "Bhaiya and I used to do it this way", and then as an afterthought paraphrase it with the clause, "when he was alive".

When someone dies, you move on, as is the practice in my adopted country, and as I hear constantly being said to me. I came back to Boston a week after I buried my mother, and went back to work the morning after I returned. My wife, who was in the USA holding the fort, so to speak, in my absence had received calls of sympathy from friends and relatives. Her colleagues at Bridgewater State College had given a tree to plant in my mother's memory. I see it every morning and every time I step out of the house-I admire it for growing taller every day and thriving even in the harsh New England winter. My mother

would have been very happy to know, if she were alive, that we planted a tree in front of my house and named it after her, Sarah. She liked to walk in my yard on the rare occasions when she was visiting me. She did not like traveling to the USA--she dreaded the long journey and the excruciatingly painful layover at London airport. The only two times she traveled to Boston were once after Shadani died, and later when my brother Ratan got married in the USA. When she traveled the first time, right after she had buried her eldest son, my cousin Naheed was traveling with her, and Naheed took very good care of my mother. However, I am not sure whether my mother was in a condition to complain about the strains of traveling, or about anything else on the road overwhelmed as she was with the pain of her loss. My brother Salek, who was then studying to be a doctor, told me that they had given her medications to alleviate the

pain. On the next trip a few years later, Salek was traveling with her and that must have eased the anxiety of traveling and the accompanying jet lag.

My mother and I endured the pain of losing Shadani together. I can't imagine what it was like to see your eldest son come back in a coffin, because nothing in life prepares you for that experience. I was not prepared for his loss either, and I was younger, in my thirties. And I sometimes wonder whether I have accepted his death and moved on or I am still in denial. But, outwardly, I have moved on, and I steel myself whenever I am in pain over my losses as I resolve again that I will move on. The pain comes and goes and I sometimes think that that's how it's going to be. As my son often says to me when faced with a difficult situation or a tough choice: "You deal with it."

The pain of losing my mother is most acute when I am by myself, driving to work, or in bed early in the morning or late at night. She and I had a common interest--our fascination with music in its many forms. She was a big Rabindra Sangeet fan, and whenever I hear some of her favorite songs, I can almost see her sitting on her bed in rapt attention nodding and following every word of the song. My brother, Swapan, knew of the therapeutic effect of music on my mother early on, and whenever she was restless or otherwise disturbed, he'd turn on the old tape recorder with the Tagore songs. The magical impact was instantaneous--she'd drop everything else, stop dead on her tracks, and just take in the music. It is as though she's been hypnotized.

In her last days, my mother was living by herself, as all her sons were on all parts of the globe doing their job. Bacchu was in a remote tea garden of Sylhet, Salek was in Saudi Arabia, and the three of us in North America. Her lonely days in her apartment were spent doing what she's done all her life, taking care of business and her caregivers.

But even in her lonely existence, she never asked any of us to go back to live with her. She knew we had chosen the life of refugees for a reason. When my brother died in Zimbabwe,

she learned the skills to console herself and others. She would say, "Shadani died a Shaheed, because he was on his way to work!" as her own Khalamma had told her. She knew work was like going to war, and akin to prayer, and she never wanted us to walk away from the battle field.

My mother was with me when she died. My Kachi khala said, "Boro Apa was waiting for you to come back before she went. She wanted to say good bye to you." It all made sense to me now. I just could not understand why my mother died only five days after I arrived, why she could not have a few more days. Well, she waited to say goodbye. However, I also sometimes wonder if she had left because of *abhimani*. Was she piqued that we took her to the hospital which she always dreaded? Or did she leave because she wanted to leave when she was in a happy surrounding with me, Sadat, and his son to keep her company?

My mother's youngest sister, my Kachi khala wrote a piece titled "Jey bone choley gelo" in a Bengali daily. She laments the fact that she was not able to visit her Boro Apa as often during the latter's illness because of many hassles that Dhaka-ites live with: traffic congestion, heat, the daily grind, etc. She writes, "Boro Apa left us because she was piqued ('*abhimani*') with us."

Yesterday, I was driving to work along a very scenic road, which winds through the town of Milton in the outskirts of Boston. This road, which cuts through a beautiful undulating landscape just before we enter Boston, is one of my favorite and riding along this stretch always makes me feel happy. I was listening on my mp3 player, and the song that came along was Tagore's '*Potho choley jety jety, kotha kone khaney tomar porosho lagey.*' (As I was traveling along, I wonder when and where I will feel your touch in my heart.) I felt a presence, as though I was enjoying the beautiful melody with my mother, as she rode along with me, absorbed in the beauty of it all.

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Letter from MONTREAL

REBECCA SULTANA

I should not have spoken ill of winter in my earlier dispatch. Old man winter continues to wreck havoc - especially on the West coast. The Pacific coast, known for its balmy weather, was taken by surprise when they were dumped with snow of the amount many have never seen in their entire lives. Life literally halted. The most affected by this recalcitrant weather pattern were the holiday travelers as their travel plans went haywire with cancelled flights, delays and re-routings. Television news replayed pictures of sleep-deprived travelers anxiously waiting for a lucky break that would transport them from the no-man zone of the airport to their familiar abodes. Then there would be others, who would camp out in the waiting area, oblivious to the rest of the world. When I had booked a flight from Montreal to San Francisco five months ago, I had no idea I would be caught up in this travel frenzy myself.

I started out on December 25th uneventfully enough. As I waited out the three-hour break at Dallas/Fort Worth airport I ached to go out and roam the familiar places I had once called home for seven years. But things were starting to get interesting. After three terminal changes that sent me scuttling all over the massive airport, the airlines people finally decided which one I was to finally board. The return part was where things really got exciting. My itinerary was precarious enough with only a half-hour break allowed to catch the connecting flight back to Montreal from JFK-New York. When my flight from San Francisco was delayed an hour I was sure I would miss my connection. I was right. The next flight was seven hours away.

Already sleep deprived because of an overnight flight, further sleep eluded me. I was already starting to feel like Tom Hanks in *Terminal*. Come to think of it, he was in this same airport! After an eight-hour wait the Montreal flight was finally announced. Hallelujah! Home was just fifty minutes away. As the plane hovered over Montreal, the flight attendant suddenly announced that the pilot was not being permitted to land and we were being re-routed to the nearest airport Boston! Unbeknownst to us, a ninety-kilometer wind was raging below which could have easily knocked the tiny aircraft clearly out of the runway. We flew to Boston in shocked silence. We alighted at Boston airport, were instructed to take a seat, even though there was none empty, until further instructions. By then, I had had enough and was ready for a good cry. Suffice it to say, I did finally reach home.

South Asian Literary Conference

The occasion for my travel was the annual South Asian Literary Association conference. This year's theme "Gender and Sexuality in South Asian Literature and Culture," meant my paper was a comparative study of Tahmina Anam's novel and Jahanara Imam's *Ektattur Dinguli*. Both narratives valorize motherhood in keeping with traditions where they become iconic national symbols. Yet, absence of similar literary representation of another group is glaringly conspicuous. Totally obliterated from the patriotic rhetoric of celebration, these women do not fit the accepted mold of mothers or sisters. The public space of agency remains exclusive to maternal or rural women who parallel the feminization of the land purely for an aestheticizing purpose within a nationalist discourse. My co-speaker, a Sri Lankan, echoed similar concerns within her country's framework. My friend Paulomi Chakraborty initiated a stimulated discussion as she drew on her readings from Neelima Ibrahim to Nasreen Akhter. Originally from Kolkata, Paulomi is finishing her PhD at the University of Alberta and has a keen interest in Bengali women's narrative of violence, with particular attention on the Partition. It was gratifying to see so many scholars interested in this part of our history, yet apart from those who speak and read Bangla, others depend on translations or wait for a Diaspora writer to pen an English novel on the topic. Bangladeshi literature and culture, rich as it is in Bangla, remains elusive to many.

In my three semesters of teaching South Asian literature at Concordia University, I had tried to be as eclectic as I could in representing the literary richness of English writing from the region. Yet apart from valorizing Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and including some translated short stories, I could not highlight Bangladesh's history until I got hold of *Noor*. Ironically, *Noor* is a Pakistani novel. Described as the first Pakistani English novel to break "a long literary silence...to focus on East Pakistan during the war of 1971" and come "to terms with its brutality," the very first page flabbergasted my students as they tried to comprehend figures in the millions of the dead. That a brutality of such magnitude had taken place in such recent past they found to be disconcerting.

As a companion piece to the novel I had used a documentary film called "War Babies," where a young Canadian named Badol returns to Bangladesh in search of his birth mother. Badol is one of many war babies adopted by Westerners. Met by resistance from all in Bangladesh,

he is unsuccessful in his mission. Throughout the documentary, Badol narrates the violence that women like his mother had to face, about 25,000 of them. Although we never get to see Badol's mother, a brief interview by Ferdousi Priyobhashini provides a first-person account of the horror many women endured. Priyobhashini offers to be Badol's mother in case he does not find his own. More statistics follow, numbers that boggles the mind. I looked on silently, being already familiar with the history of my country. As the tape ended, I bent down to turn off the DVD player while asking my first question regarding the film. Silence. As I stood up, forty pairs of stricken eyes looked back at me. Next came an avalanche of questions. Mostly "how" and "why." I added my own story, being very young yet remembering the horror when my father, an army doctor, was picked up by Pakistani soldiers just as we were about to sit for dinner at our home. My father was one of the lucky ones as he was let go after thirteen agonizing days when we had no news of his whereabouts. My students asked more questions. Why couldn't Badol find his mother? Why didn't anyone cooperate with him? Simon Dring, in the tape, answers the question in a talk with Badol, probing into what Badol had hoped to gain from his search. What would he have asked his mother had he found her? One student, well aware of the silence surrounding women during Partition, wanted to know about the repercussion following Priyobhashini's recounting. Later, on the course website, I detected a flurry of activities as students discovered old news-reels on You Tube and shared their findings. In April, the Canadian print of Anam's novel came out and many were interested in reading the book.

During all my teachings of South Asian literature, Partition by far takes on the monumental position of a traumatic event - the birth pain of emerging nations. The sheer number of conference papers echo this continued interest, followed by the Sri Lankan conflict. Bangladesh's war remains understudied to a large extent mostly because of the paucity of material written in English. Paulomi commented as much - that it took a Diaspora writer to make this history known to many whereas there are such excellent writings already filling libraries in Bangladesh. And since literature is such a potent medium to bring up the stories of the otherwise voiceless, women and minorities, there are pressing needs for such books.

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Three Poems
(translated by Farhad Ahmed)

Woman Reads the News
TOMLIKA PONDASHETH

Lapel on breast a woman reads the news:
Accident-murder-casualties-political tugs-of-war
Glowing cricket star alonging with playing field lofts
into the drawing room
Then finally the weather---

Bad weather
Yet the launch ferries had plied
A sudden storm, one overturned in the
Ganges floodwaters
The unmoved newsreader informs us---
One hundred fifty missing---twelve bodies
recovered
Among them nine women-children-old

A woman reads about women
And in this age of lapels
Synonymous with women are children and the old.

Dais
SUBODH SARKAR

On stage
There is some kind of drink.
That drink
Has no name.
It isn't called honeyed
It isn't called whiskey.
Those who go on stage
Only they
Partake of that drink.

You'll see on the dais
One clear glass
Within it clear, transparent water
On top of it an upturned saucer.

I say to those who do not get on stage:
That's not water, that's booze.

Ministers
Poets
Bureaucrats
Vice-chancellors
All of them take that drink

Otherwise, how can they lie so enchantingly into the mike?

Daily Life
FARHAD MAZHAR

Early morning knock on the door I race to open it
Nothing there just flowers nodding in the empty wind
A fleeting fog, dewdrops on the vast fields at night
Pieces of paper left behind by somebody on the grass.

Eight a.m. A tempo-wheeled middle-class day
Somebody slips and breaks a skull on a roof
Head lowered I stare out at the speeding cars
Suddenly lock eyes with someone riding a rickshaw

My office is on the upper storey, a panting climb
A bone-tiredness makes my back ache,
Work like a machine glasses glued to my eyes
Then spy a letter whose writing I know:

With a broken nib in a gentle easy/everyday style
Somebody has written one's name in capital letters
The inkwell's lip was probably broken, and three
Inkdrops tiny and large spilled in careless haste.

This spurning! First you came close to me, then withdrew
Gave the caged bird a glimpse of open skies and endless space
This is how it ends, will end, the night comes on as usual

Early morning knock on the door again I race to open it...

Farhad Ahmed is a writer/translator.

