

NONFICTION

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

The name of Sulekha Sanyal is quite unknown to even readers of Bangla literature, let alone readers of English-language newspapers, or of South Asian Indo-Anglian fiction. But an English translation of one of her novels, *Nabankur*, was published as *The Seedling's Tale* in 2001, with the translation done by Gouranga P Chattapadhyay. And both the book as well as the translation should be seen as a milestone in the history of feminist literature in Bangla language.

Sulekha lived for a short while, from 1928 to 1962 only. Excluding her major work *Nabankur*, she wrote a second novel titled *Dewal-Padma* along with some short stories. A third novel was published posthumously. But though her output is relatively small, I am sure any sensitive reader of Bangla fiction will recognize and accord to Sulekha a special place.

Had I ever read Sulekah's books at an earlier age? I can't recall but what I do remember clearly is that I first learnt about her from Torun Sanyal's article '*Uponyash Jekhane Jibon O Somoj*' (in the volume published in 2000 of *Parikotha*, a literary journal published from Kolkata), and that she hailed from Korokdi. That bit of information overwhelmed me since I too was born in a village very near Korokdi. The eight-page article gave rise within me to a sense of intense curiosity to know more about this female author.

During my hunt for more information about her, I unexpectedly found *Sulekha Sanyaler Golpo Songroho*, the first book of hers I ever held in my hands, at Shahbagh's Aziz Supermarket. How exciting were the plots of the stories! Most of these short stories are set around the time of the Second World War, the 1905 Partition of Bengal and the infamous Bengal famine. Almost all the stories are capable of drawing tears from the eyes of sensitive readers. A short note on the writer by her sister Sujata Sanyal (Chattopadhyay) opened up a different window on the writer for me. It informed that Oxford India Press's *Women Writing in India* (Vol II), edited by Susie Tharu & K. Lalita, had included some chapters from *Nabankur*'s translated into English. In *Women Writing Nabankur*'s title in English has been rendered as *The Germinating Seed*, with parts of the

In Searcht of Sulekha Sanyal



artwork by amina

novel translated by Madhuchanda Karlekar in 1993, which may have been specially commissioned for the book.

I managed to locate the postal address of Sujata Sanyal, and wrote a letter to her. Surprisingly, my letter elicited two replies - one from Sujata Di, a traditional, Bangali-educated and poetry-loving lady, and the other from Abanti Kumar Sanyal, their eldest brother. Written on 15.02.02 from Kolkata the letter's first line was "*Ami Sulekha Sanyaler Borobhai*". It was a thrilling time for me - not only to have accidentally come across such a writer, but also to be able to make contact with those who had been closest to her. Regarding Abanti Da I can only say that possibly he is the greatest Bangla-language scholar on Romain Rolland and French literature. His book *Prosongo: Romain Rolland* is considered a definitive work on the subject in Bangla. I feel very fortunate that he wrote me two letters where he also mentioned his abiding love for Bangladesh, his village Korokdi, as well as about recent developments in adjacent areas like Kamarkhali, etc. Both of his letters expressed an ardent desire for me to meet with him. On 4th March of this year, when I learnt from Sujata Di that Abanti Da had passed away on 20 December 2007 at the age of 84, I felt guilty at not having been able to meet this person who was not only Sulekha's elder brother, but a towering intellect who had expressed such a wish to meet me.

My exchange of letters was mostly with Sujata Di. By then I had come across two more references to

Sulekha Sanyal. One was in *The Little Magazine* published from New Delhi. In its 2001 September-October issue I found an article titled '*The Sannyasin of Sundarpur*'. The other was the inclusion of her short biography in *Shotoborsher Kriti Bongonari* (edited by Shyamoli Gupta, 2001, published from Kolkata). The finding and reading of these articles on her created further curiosity and awakening in me about a writer who was mostly unknown, and who had been born in a village nearby mine.

Later on, something else happened. A very close friend of mine, Probir Kumar Das, was to pay a visit to Kolkata. I had talked with him about my contacts with Sulekha's family and that Abanti Da had talked not only with great feeling for Bangladesh, but had also wanted me to meet with him. Probir, with a smiling face, went and met Abanti Da at his Salt Lake house. In the course of that Kolkata visit, he managed to procure a Xerox copy of *Nabankur* and bring it to me in Dhaka, a book I had been unsuccessful in getting hold of here. I saw that on the very first page it was inscribed that the book had been written in 1954, i.e., when Sulekha was merely aged 26! It seemed amazing how courageous and outspoken a woman she had been, born and grown up in a remote village of Faridpur, who later became a communist and refused to bow down to the conventions and rules of the day! Somebody who went on to take part in so many social and political activities in the 1940s! Not for nothing did she name her book *Nabankur*, or

new seedling, with Chobi the heroine personifying the new seed that would germinate radically different social plants and trees.

The trend of fictional creations based on autobiographical facts has a long history in English literature - some examples being Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1902) or D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) or James Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1916) in English literature. In Bangla similar treatments can be discerned in Bibhutibhushon Bandyopadhyay's *Pather Panchali* (1929), or *Aparajita* (1931), all the way to Humayun Azad's *Shob Kichu Venge Pore* (1995). But all such narratives are the works of men.

If we search for women's work of a similar kind, it would be *Nabankur*, which would easily occupy a place at the top of the list - appearing long before Taslima Nasrin's autobiographical *Amar Meyebela* or Akimur Rahman's *Rokto Punje Getha Jaua Machhi* (both published in 1999). No doubt, *Padmarag* by Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) or *Janma Aparadhi* by Sailabala Ghoshjaya (1894-1974) could be cited as earlier instances of feminist works Bangla literature, but *Nobankur* deserves its own place, a pioneering, major work based on the facts of Sulekha's own life.

Sulekha Sanyal was born in a zamindar family of declining fortunes in Korokdi on 15 June 1928. The whole family was known for its involvement in the anti-British movement. She passed her childhood days and early adolescence at her Mashima's in Chattogram. In 1942, when the city was bombed by the Japanese, she returned to her village and sat for her matriculation examination as a private candidate in 1944. Sulekha later was admitted to Rajendra College, Faridpur, and after passing her intermediate examination in 1946, went to Kolkata and enrolled herself in Victoria Institute there. In the year 1948, she got married - it seems not to have been a happy match and ended in a divorce in 1956.

Sulekha has about 30 short stories to her credit which started with '*Pankotilok*' published in 1946. Among all her stories '*Shindure Megh*' became well-known among Kolkata's literati since a film was made based on it. Stories like '*Jibonayoni*', '*Antorai*', '*Folgu*', '*Jonmastomi*', '*Chhoto Mashi*', '*Khelna*', '*Kir*', '*Songhar*', '*Biborton*', '*Chheleta*', '*Ekti*

Mamuli Golpo', '*Ulukhar*', '*Kishori*', '*Poroshpor*', '*Khola Chhithi*', '*Shock Therapy*' are some of her more memorable short stories.

After reading these books, I wanted to make Sulekha's genius known to my fellow Bangalis and began to write about her. My article titled '*Bismrito Naribadi Uponayas* Nabankur' was published in the literary page of *The Sangbad* on 15 June 2004, on what would have been Sulekha Sanyal's 76th birthday had she lived. Later on, I enlarged it into a larger and more researched one and included it in my book *Prosongo: Shiksha ebong Sahityo* published in 2005.

Extract from Nabankur*

(Translated by Madhuchanda Karlekar)

They come in a body to see her off, walking with her for a long way. Mother, Grandma, Aunt. She looks back again and again, and her eyes keep brimming over.

When all the rest have turned back, Mamata keeps standing still. The wind plays in her hair. The sari slips off her head - her eyes follow her departing daughter and then go vacant in thought. She seems no longer to be looking at the path her girl has taken, but peering misty-eyed far back into a past that speaks of failure.

The *Chatim* tree on the west bank of Bosepur marks the end of the village. From there on, the road leads to the station. In childhood Chobi used to come and stand at this point sometimes, and stare and stare at the station road. A world stretching out to a limitless horizon seemed to beckon to her then. Chobi couldn't tell then where that road would lead to, or how far.

Today Phumani, Batashi, and the others are waiting for her by that roadside. They ask her, "You won't forget us, will you, when you get to the city? You won't forget the village?"

How can she forget? The smell of the grass, the changing scent of every season has become so much a part of her being... This village is a part of everything she holds precious... With Tamal's pledge, with Adhirkaka's eager encouragement. How can Chobi ever forget?

Sukhada's friend Umapati, who has a job in Calcutta, has undertaken to escort her there. Pradip has been released from prison - he would be there to meet her at the station. Sukhada has come to put her on the train.

Kulada was not expected to be there, but

To date I have not seen the English translation titled *The Seedlings*, and the parts of it that have been translated by and included in *Women Writing in India* simply arouses more curiosity on my part about it. And on the part of others. Very few people noted, in the bygone days, the writings of Sulekha Sanyal in the literary arena of Bangla language. But surely, in this present age, new historians of Bangla literature will not miss her, and her works and name will surely become more familiar to readers of Bangla fiction.

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he had come along anyway. There was something he had wished to say to Chobi. He had hovered around her restlessly up to the last minute, and still held his peace. When t he guard blows his whistle, Kulada suddenly draws close, hesitates a little, and then says, "Tell him... tell Pradip to come home. He left in a huff... said he wouldn't come back unless I asked him to. Tell him... I asked."

Then he takes out a wad of notes and slips them into Chobi's hands. "Here, take this, divide it between yourselves. Write whenever you need anything..." Bit by bit all their faces blur. Chobi keeps staring right to the end. At last the station is left behind, and her tears suddenly spill over. She wipes them at the window and sits down quietly. Now another thought disturbs her suddenly. "Unless you go there, you won't get an idea of the world around" - somebody had told her that one day. Who was it? What was in this world? Would Chobi find a place there? Would she survive in that selfish, ruthless, competitive atmosphere? The agitation she feels - is it joy, or sadness, or fear? What can you compare it to? Gazing out of the window, the likeness suddenly hits her. It is with the pace of the train - the rhythm of movement. Moving forward, that is the main thing - one must keep going. And now, a new sense of eager expectancy fills her mind, her whole being.

*From English translation of *Nabankur* (The Germinating Seed) published in *Women Writing in India 600 BC to the Present*, ed. By S Tharu and K Lalita, Oxford India, 1993.

Muktijoddha Letters in English

Ektorer Chithi, the collection of letters from Muktijoddhas written from various war fronts/sectors during 1971, has proved to be a runaway bestseller - it is already into its third print run since it was published last month (Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashona). In it are two letters written originally in English, and which have been translated into Bengali. One is by Rumi, fahanara Imam's son, written to his uncle. The other, reproduced below, is by Ashfaq Samad.

Patgram, Rangpur
Bangladesh
25/10/71 10 p.m.

Dear Tauhid

First let me tell you (that) I am writing to you from a liberated area of Bangladesh. The Indian border is almost 18 (eighteen) miles from here. I am breathing the free air of a liberated place and by God it feels good. Liberated this place 2 weeks back.

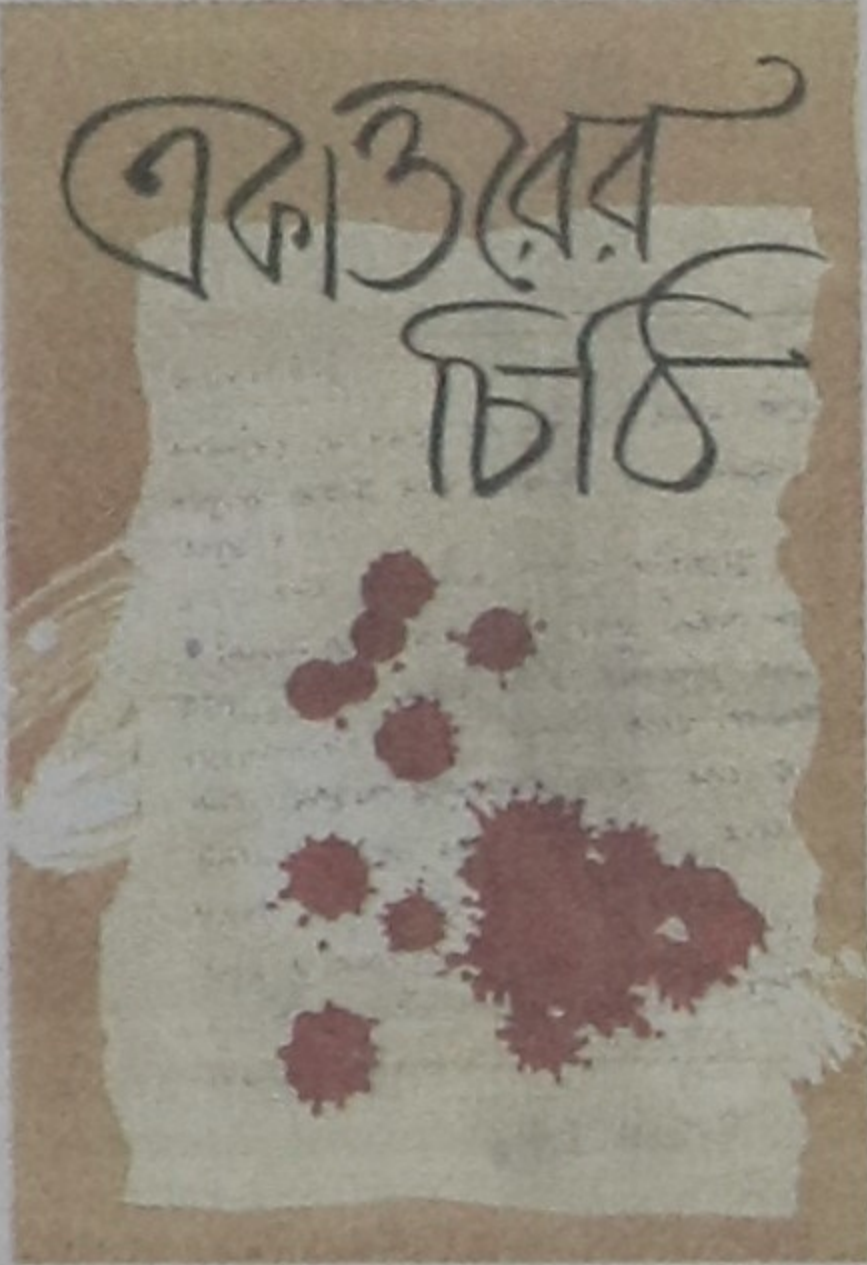
It is sometime around 10 o'clock in the evening. I am lying in my bed inside a hut.

My bed is a wooden platform dug in about two feet below the floor level. The earth raised all around me to give protection from the bullets & shells. One lamp burning with the min. light. My 'friends' the Punjabis are only 600 yards away. The sons-of-bitches have not shelled on us today/tonight, but I have a feeling they will any time now, they usually do at this time. The idiots did not let us sleep last night. Fired about 40 shells, couldn't land a single one on us - marksmanship! So we fired about 50 shells today on them. Intelligence report received one 'dog' killed - what marksmanship! Actually these kind of funny things happen quite often. Because once you are inside the bunker, you are safe. Unless one unlucky one lands right on yours (sic) top - which is very rare.

I am writing to you because after a long time I remembered the good old days. I remembered my friends, my family and above all my Dacca. You know, Tauhid, these days I don't even get much time to think about the old times. I really don't know when I shall get my next chance to write to you. The place I wrote to you last is 150 miles from here. How's London? Must be very big and glamorous. If I can dodge their bullets and stay alive I'll see you there. Fix a nice little place for me, will you?

Have you written to my home? Please take a little more trouble. Ask them to write to you about there (sic) welfare so that you can write to me about them. It is six long months I have no news of them.

How's Rukhsana and everybody at home. Give them my best. Please give my best to Najmul also. Answer fast. Love Ashfi



The Twenty-Fifth of Boisakh

(Panchishe Boishakh translated by Fakrul Alam)

(for Amiyochandra Chakravarty)

The twenty-fifth of Boisakh flows on--
Another birthday coursing
Towards the day of death.
Seated on his movable stand
At the border of minuscule births and deaths
Who is the artist weaving
A garland out of innumerable Rabindranaths?

Time's chariot moves on--
The traveler treading on foot
Lifts his drinking vessel up
And receives something to drink
By the time he's had his fill
He's fallen behind in the dark
While his vessel lies smashed to smithereens
Under the wheels of time.
Pursuing him comes one
Who has found something more to drink
Someone who has his name
But in reality is a different being.

He was a boy once upon a time.
The image built up now of the man
Through the mould of a few birthdays
Doesn't resemble the boy he once was.
Those who knew him well
Have all passed away.
That boy no longer exists in his own mind
Or in anyone else's memories.
He's left forever-- as has his world.
The laughter and tears he knew
Are not echoed in the wind anymore.
Even the shards of toys he played with
Have disappeared from sight.
He'd sit by the small window of life
Looking at the world outside.
His world limited
To what he could see through the opening.
His naive eyes would open wide
Taking in everything till they reached their limits
In the coconut tree rows canopying the garden wall.

Evenings were intense because of spells
Cast by fairy tales; no fence stood
Between fact and fantasy.
The mind crossed effortlessly
From one to the other.
In the play of light and shadow in twilight
Shadows melded with substance
As if they were kins.

His birthdays were islands
Basking in sunshine for a while
And then disappearing in Time's ocean.
At memory's ebb tide from time to time
Their peaks would become visible
As would their sunset-red coral fringes.

The twenty-fifth of Boisakh showed up next
In another era-- indistinct
In the flush of Spring's early morning sunlight.
The mendicant Baul singer that is youth
Strung a passionate tune in a one-stringed ektara
Articulating some obscure pain
Seeking the invisible man in him.

Listening to those tunes in a heavenly abode

Sometimes the muse would respond.
Sending some of her messengers
Through shaded paths lit up by palash trees in bloom
Seemingly drunk in a riot of colors
On days when work didn't matter.
I'd listen to their soft accents
Some of which I could catch.
I could see their dark eyelashes
Glisten with tears;
I'd read on their quivering lips
Intimations of intense agony.
I'd hear in their tinkling bangles
The tingle of intense anticipation.
Unknown to me
They'd leave behind
At first light of the twenty-fifth of Boisakh
Garlands woven out of newly bloomed jasmine
Overwhelming morning dreams with fragrance.

The world of those youthful birthdays
Lay in the vicinity of fairy land,
Poised between certainty and uncertainty.
Occasionally a princess would sleep there
Her overflowing tresses all around her
Occasionally she would suddenly stir
At the touch of a golden wand.

And so days went by
Till the ramparts of the twenty-fifth of boisakh
Once daubed with spring colors
Came falling down.
The young man now entered paths where shadows
quivered
Because of bokul leaves rustling in the breeze;
Where the wind sighed
And afternoon ached
At the plaintive note of a lovesick cuckoo
Implying its mate to come back;
Where bee wings thrilled,
At the subtle call of fragrant flowers;
And green and grassy groves
Ended in highways built of stone.
The young man now would add
String after sting to the ektara
He had strummed to play his tunes.

The twenty-fifth of Boisakh
Next brought me
Through rugged paths
To the shores of a sea of people
Whose waves swelled and roared.
I cast my net in their midst
Negotiating sound after sound.
Throughout the day
Till I was able to net some souls
Though some of them eluded me.

Sometimes the day would cloud over
And disillusionment set in
Making the mind stoop in ignominy
But when afternoons became unbearable
Images arrived from some Elysium
Through unforeseen ways,
Making the fruit of labor look beautiful,
Offering nectar to the exhausted soul.
Mocking apprehensions
With waves of ringing laughter.
They rekindled valiant flames;
From a fire almost consumed by ashes;
They retrieved heavenly messages
Giving them form.
Through sheer devotion.

They lit up again my fading lamp
Tuning strings that had slackened
Till music flowed again
Crowning the twenty-fifth of Boisakh
With garlands they had themselves woven.
Their magic touch
Still remains in my songs and writings.

Then my life became a combat zone
Erupting in conflicts every now and then
There were thunder-like rumblings
All across the battlefield,
Forcing me to fling aside my ektara
And pick up a kettle-drum.
Even in intense noon heat
I had to speed on
Moving through currents of success and failure.
In the process thorns pierced my feet.
My heart too bled profusely.
Relentless waves tossed my vessel
From one side to another
Aiming to drown the freight of my life
Till it was submerged in lies and libel.

My ship of life stuck to its course
Past hate and love
Envy and friendship
Discord and harmony.
Crossing billows of steaming emotions.
In the midst of travails
Amidst conflicts and commotion.
Where you find me now is in an autumnal twenty-fifth
When light is fading and age weighing me down.

Do you realize
In what I have written
There is a lot that is unsaid
A lot that is disjointed
A lot that has been evaded?
In your respect for me,
In the love that you show
In your ability to forgive
You've built up a complex image
Compounded out of the good and the bad
The innermost me and what you see externally
The fame I have attained and my failures.
This construct is what is now on show.
He is the man you've come to garland
And the man I've become publicly
In the winter of my life.
Even as I leave behind for you all
My blessings.
As I take my leave
Let this image remain in your thoughts.
I certainly won't be smug
Because it is now the property of Time.

And then give me leave
So that I can retreat
Beyond the black and white warp
From which life is woven
Beyond what I've become officially
To a lonely and private existence;
Let me mingle different tunes
Produced from diverse instruments
Till I reach the source of all music
And meld with the primal melody.

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