

REFLECTIONS

READINGS

# Love in its timelessness

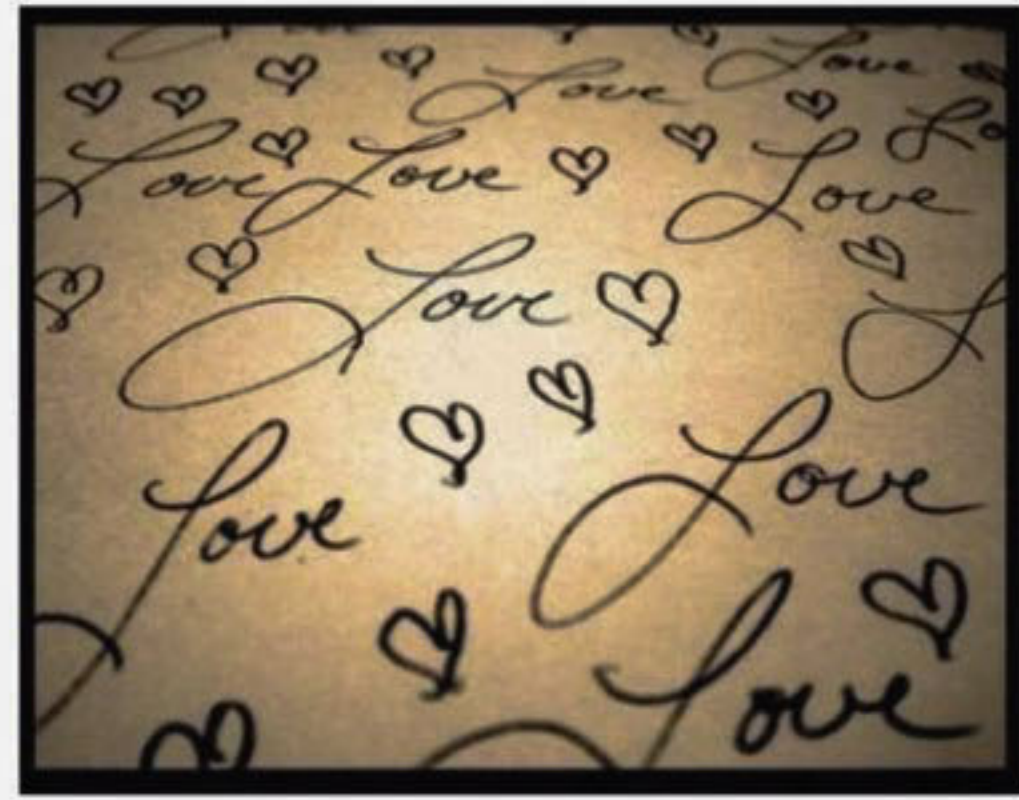
SYED NAQUIB MUSLIM

The question "What is love?" still intrigues those who have experienced love and those who are yet to experience it. Poets, novelists, dramatists, philosophers, psychologists and educators have tried to discover the meaning of love. It seems no word is more misused or overused than love and leadership.

If love is a partnership, then who is the lover and who is the beloved? A vegetarian might, in a tone of advocacy, say, "I love vegetables." Again, an Indian trainee-civil servant suddenly turns emotional and declares to a Bangladeshi lady training coordinator, "I love you very deeply." The lady reacts inwardly, using again the same word: "Does he love my flesh or my mind?" "My mother loves me very much," claims a child. Desmond Morris claims we love our children because we know that our children carry our genes, in the same way our parents loved us because we inherit genes from them. It is actually the urge for biological continuance that induces the exercise of this emotion. A good citizen may exclaim: "I love my neighbors!" A brilliant student of English literature joins the customs service, and after his induction, confirms: "I love my profession". The rector of a church might say, "I love God". The Bible says: "Let love be your greatest aim." According to Rick Warren, a pastor, life minus love is equal to zero. To Mother Theresa, love "is not what you do, but how much love you put into it that matters." Life can be best used by loving people, and there is no specific time to begin loving. It is 'now'. But this delicate human impulse has been ignored by most scientists. Abraham Maslow, a social psychologist, states: "It is amazing how little the empirical sciences have to offer on the subject of love." Why is love ignored by scientists? Sorokin answers that love appears to scientists to be "unconvincing, certainly unscientific, prejudicial, and superstitious." Love is condemned by some as out-and-out pathological. Many tend to dismiss it as both a naive and an insane passion. Others glorify it by saying, "Love is all". Some again turn dogmatic and declare: "God is love".

To some, love is a synonym for sex. Sigmund Freud "the dirty old man," John Donne, the metaphysical poet, and D H Lawrence, the novelist advocate of bodily love, commonly believe sensual gratification is a part of love. To Lawrence, to deny sex is to deny

love, and to deny love is to deny life itself. Sex is the basis of man-woman love. Sex, as he says, "means the whole of the relationship between man and woman". De-linking sex from love is a kind of hypocrisy, which Lawrence hated. For Donne and Lawrence, love is not only listening to each other but also touching each other. They believe it is through body that one can enter the soul. They, perhaps in a paraphrasing of Descartes, seek to say, "We touch, therefore we are." Hinting at the bodily need as the basis of love, American journalist Ambrose Bierce considers love as "a temporary insanity curable by marriage." Often a child is the culmination of the expression of love between the male and the female. When a woman feels a sense of love for her partner, she tends to say, "If he truly loves me, I'll give him a child." When the child is born, it craves to say: "I just want to be loved."



Browning, after years of epistolary dialogue with his admiring reader Elizabeth Barrett, falls in love with her and then experiences it as a power that creates a world of beauty and harmony. To Browning, "Love is duty." Shakespeare considers love as a window that opens for lovers "a brave new world." Bacon condemns love as "weak passion", a "child of folly" and admonishes us to keep our hearts "well-fortified" so that love does not enter our hearts and ruin us altogether. According to George Bernard Shaw, "Love is a cigarette which begins with fire and ends with ashes." Shaw believes that through genuine and pure love one can derive undiluted pleasure and create the superman. Love is the life

force through which humankind can be transformed into super-humankind. This implies that when genuine lovers as sexual partners unite out of pure emotion, a brilliant child is supposed to be born. As Jean-Paul Sartre noted, "Long before birth, even before we were conceived, our parents have decided who we shall be." To Kahlil Jibrán, the noted Egyptian poet, love is "the union of two fragrant flowers; and the mingling of their fragrance the creation of the third soul." Thoughts on love are not confined to poets and philosophers only. As Leo Buscaglia says, when it comes to love, each person is his or her own philosopher. People equate love with sex, a state of joy, pain, truth, mutual attraction, security, fraternity, filial affection, fantasy, a state of ecstasy and a condition of disillusionment. In fact, love is not to be pondered; it is to be experienced.

Love has a language of its own. Love should always articulate positive words, words that are pleasant, joyful and reinforcing. True lovers will always say, in the words of Lord Tennyson, "For us there is waiting and waiting; rest is not our business." An immature lover will say, "I love you because I need you", whereas a mature lover will say, "I need you because I love you." After all, to give love one must possess love. Love tends to disappear when lovers use callous, depressing, dull, unpleasant, and non-reinforcing negative words. The most favourite word for the growth and sustenance of love is "yes". "Yes" works as an elixir when love turns sick. A genuine lover pronounces "yes" to joy, "yes" to rediscovery, "yes" to even differences. James Joyce concludes his classic novel *Ulysses* with great affirmation: "Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes." "Yes" brings two lovers closer and closer. "No" is a word unknown to true lovers. Only a frigid or insipid lover can afford to say "no." Thus words spoken by lovers reflect what they are, what they feel, what they seek, and what they learn.

The discussion signifies that the word 'love' still remains problematic, vague and nebulous. When so much is about love, the question that again silently creeps into our minds unawares is: What is love? The easiest and perhaps the best answer is: Love is love.

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# By a Woman Writ

RAZIA SULTANA KHAN

INCENSE scented breeze, platters of cheese and thou (the muse going into overdrive) - this may not be vintage Khayyam but for some of us this is the stuff that dreams are made of.

On the 8th of March, a warm spring day, a number of literature aficionados congregated at the entrance of the English Department of Independent University, Bangladesh, to celebrate International Women's Day. Readers had signed up the previous week to take turns at a day-long non-stop reading of their favorite pieces; texts written by women, for women or about women.

The readers/audience comprised of a mixed bag. Gender, language, class or education nothing was a barrier.

The audience was fluid. Teachers left to teach, students went off to their classes and administrative staff to their stacks of files. Others slipped in and took their place. The audience swelled and thinned like an accordion, at times spilling into the attached garden, to other times when only a few chairs were occupied. In between, bowls of grapes and platters of cheese changed hands.

The theme of the celebration was, "Breaking the Silence." The ball was set rolling with a quote from Audre Lorde, the black, American poet who died of cancer in 1992:

*Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. ... What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sick and die of them, still in silence?*

From: "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action"; read by Razia Sultana Khan

The range of topics was multicultural as well as multilingual. Poems and excerpts from all over the world found a place, in Bangla, English, French and Urdu.

Many readers chose texts empowering women. Some praised women's physical attributes:

*Pretty women wonder where my secret lies. I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size*

*But when I start to tell them, They think I'm telling lies. I say, It's in the reach of my arms The span of my hips, The stride of my step, The curl of my lips. I'm a woman Phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, That's me.*

From: "Phenomenal Woman" by Maya Angelou; read by Andaleeb Chowdhury

*She hangs like a star in the dew of our song; She springs like a beam on the brow of the tide, She falls like a tear from the eyes of a bride. Lightly, O lightly we glide and we sing, We bear her along like a pearl on a string. "Palanquin Bearers" by Sarojini Naidu, read by Razia Sultana Khan*

At times this ethereal quality can totally take over:

*Like a dandelion seed, that flies through the air, and lands randomly, only to disappear, I also faded away.*

Sabrina Fatma Ahmed read from her own work

Many of the texts dealt with the hard terrain women walk, the trials they face:

*I was married at ten, had a child at fifteen. Later that year my husband remarried.*

Nur Jahan (IUB's longest serving and only female cleaner) has her own story, and

*You're going to leave her too and I know it She'll never know what made you go She'll cry and wonder what went wrong Then she'll begin to sing this song*

*Poor Girl just like me.*

"Poor Girl" by Maya Angelou; read by Ifatun Nahar

Yet time over time women have shown the resilience to overcome all odds:

*You may write me down in history With your bitter, twisted lies, You may trod me in the very dirt But still, like dust, I'll rise.*

"Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou; read by Andaleeb Chowdhury

*and But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the window glass, say the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a cherishing so deep for my own blowing hair, chapped face and unbuttoned coat that I'm speechless: I am living. I remember you.*

"What the Living Do" by Marie Howe; read by Lauren Lovelace

Other verses are difficult to pigeon-hole:

অনেকেই বাবাকে বলতো, 'আমি তো মিসেস সুফিয়া কামাল', তখন বাবা বলতেন, 'তোমার বউ যদি মিসেস ইসলাম হত, আমি মিস্টার সুফিয়া কামাল হলাম, তাতে অসুবিধা কি?' আমি তো পর্বিত এটার জন্য।

উৎস: "নীলিমার নীচে": সুলতানা কামাল, পাঠ করেছেন: লিমা চৌধুরী

SHORT STORY

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I breathed my last yesterday morning. As I now lie in the casket waiting to be lowered into my final resting place, I can hear my wife, or should I say my widow, whispering to my brother Sam about something, probably a last minute detail or to check on some other arrangement before the four gravediggers are called in to crank the pulley to lower the coffin into the crypt.

Even in her moments of grief, my wife looks very attractive, as she does now. I've seen this face for a long thirty odd years, but her facial features still look so fresh to me. Or maybe she looks so engaging now because I know this is the last time I'll probably see her. As they say, parting makes the heart grow fonder, or the thought of parting is making my heart grow even fonder.

I wish I could whisper something into her ear before they lower my body into the grave and I am covered with earth. I wish I could tell her that I'll miss her, and that I'll wait for her until she is able to join me. I wish I could tell her that my heart is already longing for her even though we've been apart for only one day. I haven't talked to her since early yesterday morning when I asked her for a drink of water. She brought me a small cup of water, which I drank very fast. I thanked her and handed back the cup to her, and then fast fell asleep, or that was what I thought then. Little did I imagine that I would not be able to wake up after a short nap. The first time I realized that something was not right was when I saw Anita, my wife, crying rather hysterically as she was shaking me in a bid to awaken me from my sleep. Her sharp-pitched tone as she was calling my name, interspersed with loud shrieks, and later all the people gathered around me told me that something had happened, that I would not probably be able to wake up again. Or, at least, wake up to be able to talk to Anita in the usual way, as she stood on this side of the "divide" which was separating us now.

# At my funeral

them to join us. Anita and I had joked about making up a wish list of things we should be doing before we get too old, and I had already made a mental list. This plan was hatched after we saw the movie, "The Bucket List", in which two terminally ill men escape from a cancer ward and head off on a road trip with a wish list of "to-dos" before they die. I had also planned to fix some loose shingles on my garage and the door on the back entrance to the house. I try, but to no avail, to flash back to the moment when I had told Anita of my desire and my goal to finish this job before winter sets in. Soon, the snows will be here, and the winds will chip away at the siding leaving more areas exposed to the elements. I am now worried that she will miss this maintenance job, unless she recovers fast enough to contact Kenny who has taken care of our repairs over the last few years. I feel a little relieved at the thought that Kenny will probably help her as needed. I was trying to locate him in the crowd, but my line of vision was obstructed by a mound of dirt piled high near the grave.

Soon I could hear a rustle as the gravediggers approached the site. They look so good in their uniform, and appear strong and muscular. I was feeling comfortable at the thought that they would not drop me too fast as they lower me into the grave. I now wonder why people have to be put away under the earth after they pass on. Why couldn't there be a more creative way of treating our departed ones? I wonder where this practice comes from and why? I now like the idea of the Egyptians who would preserve the bodies for eter-

the best for a few years at least. That's my consolation.

I can see my brother Eddy, now asking the priest to offer another round of prayers. As soon as he started to recite the holy verses aloud, I could see my wife and daughter wiping off their tears. My son looked down glumly and I know he is also emotionally moved. But he is one who does not like to display his feelings. He is very brave and I always admired the way he coped with the many adversities he faced. He always came out ahead, and that gives me a great sense of relief now. I wonder if he feels betrayed that I left him suddenly and did not finish many of the conversations I was having with him. He was always curious to know how his mother and I stayed married for so many years, and I was starting to tell him about my side of the story little by little. One reason I wanted to share with him my thoughts, or "secrets of a long and lasting marriage", as they often call it, is for him to be in a stable and happy relationship. I think he understood that the strong glue that had kept me and Anita together, even though we had very different personalities, was that we complemented each other.

Soon the prayer, eulogy, and other rituals were over, and I could sense a little restlessness among my children and brothers as the grounds keepers approached the coffin. Each positioned himself at one of the four corners and picked up the pole that held up the platform on which I was resting. As soon as they touched the crank, my wife, ran up to the casket and touched it with her hands. I was surprised that that she did that since I was not anticipating her to approach my casket any more as all the goodbyes were already said. She just knelt down next to the coffin and rested her head on the lid. I could barely hear her as she was whispering something. I was not sure if she was wishing me farewell, offering prayers in Greek, or just reciting one of my favorite poems. I wish I could hear her since that would tell me what she was thinking. Was she wishing me luck on this journey or was she offering me some advice as was her practice? Every morning before I started out for work, she would offer me the usual warnings, "Please be careful, please do not speed, and please remember your health is more important than punctuality." I know she couldn't possibly say any of that. What else could she say? "Please do not worry about us?" Or, "please take care of yourself?" That would be funny indeed since nobody is sure what happens where you are buried and spend time all by yourself. Maybe she muttered, "Hope to see you soon?" That would be very odd indeed, since I know she and I talked about dying quickly in succession. While neither of us ever said, "I can't live without you", formally at least we knew that living alone would be tough on whoever was the survivor.

However, we did talk about dying on the same day, or within a few minutes of each other. Once she read in a newspaper about a couple who had passed away within a few days of each other, and said to me, "Oh, what a nice ending." I was always curious to know if a survey were conducted, how many married men and women would want to die as soon as the partner passes away? I was planning to find out by going on the Internet. Well, now I have to wait to find out since I do not know what lies ahead once I cross the Rubicon.

After a few minutes, Anita got up and the coffin was slowly being lowered. As I was reaching the bottom of the grave, a remarkable thing happened. I thought I saw Anita lean on my brother Jay, and I thought she had passed out. There was a little commotion as the gravediggers got distracted for a split second, but they continued and I could sense from the bottom that some of the mourners were attending to Anita. I could not see whether she had just collapsed from exhaustion or really passed away. I was soon covered with dirt and could not see or hear anything further.



nity. The ancient way, mummification or otherwise, would have been a good option for me as Anita could have visited me every now and then. I certainly would have liked it even though she probably might have found the experience very unnerving. I have never visited any tomb where the body of the deceased was preserved. I wonder if some of the people who've visited Lenin's Tomb in Moscow freaked out when they saw his body. I can now see my daughter approaching the casket. She is one person who I am so sad to leave behind. This is not necessarily so because she was closer to me than my son, but she always brought me gifts from her travels. When she was in elementary school, she brought "World's Best Dad" plaques, and every Christmas she would buy me gifts from the school's Christmas shop. I wish they would bury some of those items with me. At least those mementos would help me pass the lonely days in the dark box where I will be spending all my time. I read that the Egyptians appointed the burial chamber suitably for the journey after life. In fact, a few months ago, there was an exhibition of Egyptian artifacts at the Museum of Fine Arts entitled "The Afterlife: What do you pack for a trip to the hereafter?" With the benefit of hindsight, I regret not visiting the show since I might have benefited from the exhibition.

I now remember that my wife also gave me "World's Best Husband" award many years ago, but I have not seen that one the last few years. I wonder if she had thrown it away, or removed it because she no longer thought of me that way. Well, I was

Some their strength:

নারীকে প্রশংসা দিয়াছি মুক্তি নর সম অধিকার। মানুষের গড়া প্রাচীর ভাঙ্গিয়া করিয়াছি একাকার।

উৎস: কাজী নজরুল ইসলাম, পাঠ: নাশিদা কামাল

and,

*If the first woman God ever made Was strong enough to turn the world Upside down, all alone Together women ought to be able to turn it rightside up again.*

Sojourner Truth (Adapted to poetry by Erlene Stetson) and read by Tanvir Khan

Motherhood was a popular topic, from praise for the strength in her seemingly frail body:

*My mother is like a shell, so easily broken. Yet the fact that I was born bearing my mother's shadow cannot be changed.*

"Mother" by Kiyoko Nagase; read by Ifatun Nahar

through the trials, and depression of pregnancy,

*I'm a means, a state, a cow in calf. I've eaten a bag of green apples Boarded the train there's no getting off.*

From: *Metaphors* by Sylvia Plath; read by Asma Shams.

to a mother's writing to her unborn child:

"তুমি কি হবে -- হলে না মেয়ে? যদি মেয়ে হও তাহলেই বেশি ভালো লাগবে আমার। আমি চাই আমি মেসব কিছু মধ্য দিয়ে অঙ্গসর হজি সেসব তুমিও অভিক্রম করো। আমার মা- বিনি মেয়ে হিসেবে জন্মানোকে দুর্ভাগ্য মনে করতেন, তার সঙ্গে আমি মোটেই একমত নই।"

উৎস: "হাত বাড়িয়ে দাও": গরিয়ানা ফালগাট্রি, পাঠ: সিকাভ ই আম

A woman's role during war is often seen in passive terms, often through the suffering of a mother:

*Oh world wake up his mother screams Another atrocity with holocaust fears Peace has been written in Rainbow colors And doves are praying for all the mothers*

From: Poems about Palestine by Laila Yaghi, Palestine-born American poet; read by Sayyeda Tun Noor Sameera.

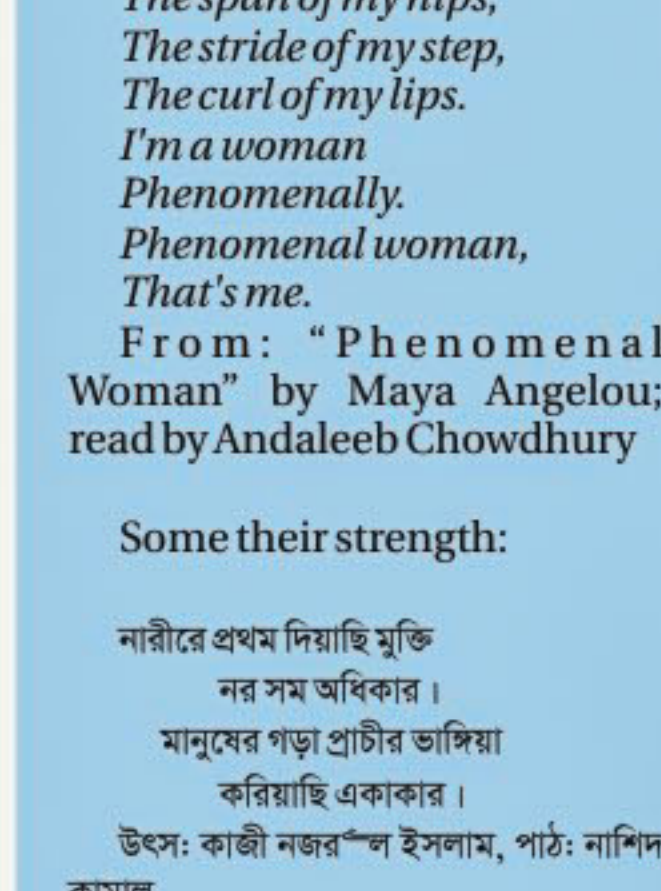
It was wonderful to get a glimpse of women's contribution during war. So often this is excluded and undocumented:

ব্রীটিশভাষ্যে চিত্রিতম ভোলেনি। শোনা যায়, মৃত্যুসঙ্কেত সময় ১৯৭১ সালে মিছিল করবার সময় চট্রাঙ্গের মেয়েরা ঘরে ঘরে মা বোনদের যুদ্ধের জন্য আর্দ্রান জালিয়ে বলতেন- মা বোনো ব্রীটিশভাষ্য পথ ধরে/বাংলাদেশ স্বাধীন করো।"

উৎস: অজ্ঞাত, পাঠ: সানজিদা আহমেদ

There were texts celebrating the softer side of women, their ethereal quality:

*Softly, O softly we bear her along,*



Lauren Lovelace at the discussion.

আমাদের ত বিবাস নে, অব্যবহারে সহিত উন্নতির বেশী বিবাস নাই। উন্নতির জন্য অবশ্য উচ্চশিক্ষা চাই।"

উৎস: "বোরকা", বেগম রোকেয়া সাখাওয়াত হোসেন। পাঠ: কারিন পাউলিন রোজারিও

and still:

*I tire of my beauty, I tire of this Empty splendour and shadowless bliss; With none to envy and none gainsay, No savour or salt hath my dream or day. Queen Gulnaar sighed like a murmuring rose.*

*Give me a rival, O King Feroz. "The Queen's Rival" by Sarojini Naidu; read by Nazrul Islam*

Quite a few readers chose to read from their own work.

*She wanted to be shielded in a shroud for the dead, to replace the sari she tightly wrapped around her torso to cover her bare flesh, her waist, her arms, her neck, but leaving her face untouched. Her husband bought her soft silk saris, and demanded she let him watch her as she coiled them around her voluptuous body, hissing as it caressed her as she would not willingly permit him to do.*

"Locked Inside" by Sheela R Rahman

র-মকী তোমার কাছে মা চাই। মা চাই চ-৬/পর্বিতা নারীর কাছে-মা চাই আমার অন্তরার কাছে-

উৎস: "র-মকীর জন্য": নাজমীন সুলতানা খান; পাঠ করেছেন: শেখর নিজেই।

and

*Nothing is indispensable At least not anymore But my heart will miss a beat thinking of the space that was once yours! "A Missed Beat" by Jackie Kabir*

Dear Reader, this piece is for you. To give you a whiff of what we experienced on March 8th. All that remains is a prayer, best expressed by Paulo Coelho. It's from a concert arranged for the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Shirin Ebadi.

*To the woman who is here tonight, may she be each and every one of us, may her example spread, may she still have many difficult days ahead, so that she can complete her work, so that, for the generations to come, the meaning of "injustice" will be found only in dictionary definitions and never in the lives of human beings.*

"For the Woman who is All Women" by Paulo Coelho; read by Farida Sheikh.

(The title is from "The Introduction" by Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea - a 17th century poet)

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