

REFLECTIONS

My Tribal Being

HELAL MOHAMMED KHAN

Ever been to the hills? No, I am not asking about those *tillas* or hillocks that you see in the north-east or other parts of the country, lulling you into a false impression of heights. But somewhere far south, and far above, up in the mountains deep inside Chittagong? If so, then you know how it feels at the top.

Just imagine a day when you are out tracking into one such hilly range. You started amid early morning drizzles; then an hour of strolls through the suburb, the sky clearing as the sun peeped out, and you were at the foothills. Now you started climbing with the sun at your back and your lips tight; occasional slips, and your breaths heavier; but as you ascend, the air cleaner and lighter until you reached a cliff-top high above on the range. A little rest, and the dizziness gone from your head so that your vision clearer, and now you standing near the mossy edge of the cliff that overlooks the green valley and a small river which is just barely seen. Standing at such unfathomable heights when your thoughts are far away from the urban hassles, or after a while when you are treading softly down the tracks, or if you are back on another daybreak, and this time if it is winter and you a little forlorn, but no less eager to step up the *Shorger Shiri* (“Stairs to Heaven”) -- that’s what they call climbing in hills), you discover life so much in its unearthly form! In the vast silence of that serene landscape, you feel it easier than ever to indulge into elevated thoughts, whatever transitory, just because you are up there. Much to your wonder, your uplifted soul gets to be aware of things bigger than its own self, feels the presence of the massive blue sky overhead and bows to the sublime existence of the omnipotent all around its solitary being.

I remember sometime in my early youth we used to stay atop such mountains. To reach there you had to cross a windy river, and the boat took you to a bazaar which sat only twice a week to allow for the tribesmen to come down from their distant *paras*, some of them across a massive lake with crystal waters in between the mountains. Initially you had to walk by the foothill and move into a pass that took you to a small stream; you

Letter from Boston

Small Talk

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

If you live in Boston or anywhere on the East Coast, you can’t miss the newest commercial for Dunkin Donuts, America’s favorite coffee shop, which boldly claims “American Runs on Dunkin”. That may be true, since one needs a good cup of coffee before one can do anything on a cold frosty morning. However, my experience has been that this country also runs on spoken words. At work, on radio shows, at supermarkets, on the phone, at social events, in politics, or anywhere when people connect with each other, spoken words is a key ingredient, the electrons that keeps our life moving. In our everyday life, we also often engage in small talk, “water cooler conversations”, as it is sometimes called.

What got me thinking about small talk is a headline on the last day of the year on *USA Today*, the national newspaper with the second largest circulation. In big letters the front page declared 2010 as “The Year We Stopped Talking”. According to the article, the widespread use of Facebook, Twitter, SMS and other electronic tools is leading us to an environment where we don’t talk to each other any longer.

Be that as it may, I like to talk and so does the average person that I meet on the street. I remember, when I was six years old, my homeroom teacher at Mrs. Cox’s Private School in Karachi wrote ‘talkative’ in the Teacher’s Comments section of my report card. Needless to mention my parents were not too amused to learn of my classroom antics. However, that attempt to stifle me did nothing to change me. I rather wore the label ‘talkative’ as a badge of honour. And, I still talk, and talk for a living, too. Every day, I ‘blabber’ with tons of people who call me to talk, whether in my office, my business or at home.

What do we talk about? We talk about the weather, about the stock market, about my old country, about computer problems and what have you. But talking is not easy for me, particularly at the office water cooler. This is the spot where we gather informally for chit chats, to feel the pulse of the office, and to exchange vital information about life. To be a good “cooler talker” one needs to be up-to-date on popular topics, such as sports, TV personalities, fashion trends, office gossip, and Facebook culture. While I keep up with current affairs, pop music and literary events, I know I am terribly lacking in many other conversation topics circulating at my office cooler.

Fortunately for me, I do better at my small business, i.e., my second job. I meet a variety of people from all walks of life but since I am in my own territory, I have the “home court” advantage. Here is a typical conversation:

I: Hi Kevin, how’s business?
K: Very slow. You know how it isbills to pay, debts to settle, creditors to please, etc.
I: I hear you! So, how can I help you today?
K: Do you guys carry any medication for headaches?
On days when we’re working together, my brother

followed its sandy beds but left it after a while to catch up with a foot track rising almost from nowhere. You walked, bent already under the weight of your packs, and not much willing to leave the cool water of the stream. So your guide waves at you; he was an indigenous young fellow who came from a tribal village that looked up the grassy hill on top of which you were to camp yourself. Now tracks lead you to the mountainside, taking you up gradually; the path a little slippery and occasionally there were one or two brooks to cross until you found another pass between two dark hills. The sun was no more to be seen over your head because there were tall trees with big leaves overhead, and now you reached another stream; this one with stronger current and clearer water, and you stopped to rest for a while.

Moments later, you drinking, and leaning against a rock with your packs still on for you never had the energy to get those removed. Some snacks for you both, your bottles refilled and you started over. Again the trail followed the stream, but this one with bed full of pebbles, so you are careful not to slip over; a few stumbles though, and you reached the end where the waters suddenly dropped to a sad-looking valley. A little effort with the logs left by some kind tribesmen, and you crossed. Tracks now greener; occasionally one or two boulders lay jutting out from the hill at one side, then a gorge to pass and suddenly you had the sun over your head. Now you moved through the ridges; a few *jums* to pass by, and your guide stopped short of a forest full of bamboo-grooves. Trails were no more to be found easily, being hidden beneath a blanket of stinking bamboo leaves. The decayed leaves smelt strong at times, but you didn’t care as much you did to avoid the small, green-coloured snakes, one or two of which you already stepped over while they were crawling across the indistinct tracks.

Deep inside the forest there were streams with clear waters, but your companion was not inclined to rest. You now had to follow the bed of a stream with rocks and pebbles of different sizes; and those with sharp edges pinching you through the rubber of your shoes.

does most of the talking. He is an artist and has a wide array of friends in the community and in the Dorchester section of Boston where he lives. So he can engage our customers in conversations on pop culture, music, movies, Internet, video games, etc. etc. that I have no clue about. His conversation goes like this:

B: Hey dude, what’s up?
C: Nothin’ much. Just the same ol’ same ol’. Can’t take this crap no more!
B: I hear yah. Any plans for tonight?
C: We’ll just hang out at Moody’s and watch the Celtics cream the Sixers.
B: Cool.

To make up for my lack of born talent as a conversationalist, I sometimes prepare in advance for interviews, office parties, or other scenarios. For example, if I have to ask my bank to forgive a loan that I took but forgot to pay, I would work out a whole line of excuses beforehand and rehearse my lines as I walk in to see the loan officer. Another trick that we learned in high school is a cheat sheet that is handy before an “impromptu” talk.

For example, last year Jim, my co-worker, was called to duty as a National Guard to serve in Afghanistan. Obviously, his family was not happy about it since they did not want to see him leave just before Christmas. At our office send-off party for Jim, we all wanted to show our solidarity with him and also to cheer him up. At these send-off parties, we each go before the microphone, and whoever has the wittyest words and funniest lines gets special recognition from our peers. I kept on racking my brains for a suitable topic and decided to offer a “top ten list” popularized by *The David Letterman Show* on TV. At the party, when it was my turn, I pulled out a small sheet of paper, and started my speech whose title was “Ten Reasons Why Jim Will be Happier in Kabul”. Among the advantages of going from Boston to Kabul that I listed were absence of parking hassles, free accommodation and meals, availability of free transportation, etc. Needless to point out, all, particularly Jim, had a good laugh.

The following week was very busy for us as we were updating our computer system. On Tuesday, I had a very busy day. I had to finish a list of things before I signed off for the day. I kept the conversations short and decided to cut down on small talk. One easy way of doing that is to end any conversation abruptly with the following phrase, “Let me see what I can do”. My boss, whose office is next to mine, always pulls me into discussions where a lot of talk is necessary. Angry customers, impatient callers or frustrated supervisors. Today, he noticed that I was not in a chatty mood with my co-workers, and overhearing three “Let me see” curt replies, he popped his head into my office and winked his eye, “you’re in a grumpy mood today!”. I felt like telling him, “you are not your charming self either” but decided not to. As they say, sometimes discretion is the better part of valour.

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Occasionally you had to stop, though, as when the guide confused himself near a large crack that had torn apart a massive black hill. You stood waiting, until the quicker fellow located the mossy, long wooden plank a little away from the crack; it was cut across at several places so one could stop over and climb up into the defile immediately above. Tracks gradually became easier to find, but most of them were winding and often crisscrossing, and you were hardly sure if you had not crossed one such just minutes before. Occasionally you had to be annoyed with the guide who was not willing to talk much, and then you both stopped before a wooden culvert with broken planks which you are sure you had crossed half an hour before. You are angry, momentarily, for minutes later you are both grinning, still a little perplexed about the route, but never tensed, because you knew for sure that up above when you reached your camp on the peak that overlooked the village to which this guide himself belonged, life was pretty fine and charming, and so much in its purest forms.

Afterwards, when you did make it home to your camp, the sun was in decline. But the sky was yet clear and a soft breeze blew from the direction of the massive mountain range stretched on the other side of the border. In front of you, the mountainside sloped gently away, but further down it was steep and you could see the green, hedgy track winding through the pass. Occasionally, and especially if it was summer, there were lighter clouds above, and if the rains were due, you saw clouds even bellow, in groups and in tandem, obscuring your view of the village and beyond the pass to the next hills.

A hot cup of tea at last, and you are refreshed, your feet dried by then, the wet clothes still on and clouds below floating away; you could now watch the village kids playing in the small bare yard in front of the *kiang ghar* (the house for worship), the cows and a few goats left free in the nearby grassy field. If it was still noon, you saw the short-dressed young girls tiptoeing themselves towards the small pond at the other end of the village. The apparently barren huts told you it was

NOTES

Scholar reflects on wife's body



SHAIFUL ISLAM

“Chughtai, Hossain and Durrani identify culture specific practices such as child marriage, dowry, son preference, polygamy, honor crimes and marital rape as primary sources of masculinist power that converts a wife’s body into a site of oppression,” said Dr. Hafiza Nilofar Khan to begin the 29th lecture of the Lecture Series on English Studies organized by the Department of English at IUB.

Dr. Khan’s talk on ‘Treatment of a Wife’s Body in the Writings of Three Sub-Continental Women Writers: Ismat Chughtai, Selina Hossain and Tehmina Durrani’ was based on a comparative, cross-cultural feminist study conducted on the writings of Ismat Chughtai of India, Tehmina Durrani of Pakistan and Selina Hossain of Bangladesh as part of her Ph.D dissertation submitted to the English Department of University of Southern Mississippi in 2008.

Dr. Khan’s study of the fiction and autobiographical works of these writers reveals the deeply rooted deadly traditional modes of domestic violence. She says that their depiction of the sociological, religious and legal aspects of some of the sources of wife abuse reflects their reservations about the institutions of marriage, family, law and religion in the contemporary Sub-Continent. She adds that the everyday experiences of wives as depicted in their writings bespeak not only of their limited power to negotiate with patriarchy, but also of their own complex attitude towards hegemonic authority. She highlights that the stories of the authors under discussion provide extraordinary insight into the vulnerable position of wives caught in the complex web of Muslim families. They also show them as having the ability to manipulate their environment and demand recognition of individuality and self respect. The stark reality of the sexually frustrated wives, oppressed daughters-in-law, or despondent maids is also often redefined in the works of her authors in terms of opportunities for self-awareness.

Dr. Khan briefly summarized the four chapters of her dissertation with specific emphasis on chapter four, which involves the wife’s agency. Agency in contemporary theory refers to the “ability to act or perform an action.” It can also be defined as something that “hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or

the pineapple harvesting season and that most of the men and women and even the children were still out in their *jums*. But you knew for sure that by the time it was afternoon, the village would be full of its inhabitants, the cows and goats herded off the field and the children in added strength. Later, when the sun was creeping down to the ranges in the west, there would be many of the young men, and a few of the elders playing football in the big field that stood in the centre of the village. Some of the elderly women and almost all the younger girls would be watching, and chanting in low voices with the infants cuddling their mothers.

These days, when you hear of fires and arson in the Hills, and of riots and skirmishes over issues which have been left to persist for decades, you feel somehow cheated, not sure why. At times you cannot resist an urge to scream, and to shout and protest, but you do not, because deep down your heart you bear memories of many rhetorical and false assurances of past times. Occasionally, an uncontrolled rage does declare its indomitable presence in manners both proper and improper, but ultimately loses itself in search of some ‘appropriate moment which is sure not now’; and then you are a dead man again! Hiding in the solace of a Jehovah’s Witness, you are not the one who dares to ‘disturb the universe’. Like one Prufrock of Eliot, you are afraid to lead yourself to that overwhelming question, “*Oh do not ask, ‘What is it?’ Let us go and make our visit*”.

That said, I know, the unsung melodies inside your heart still await a passionate singer; the hilly people also wait, with their habitual patience, for a true leader; and this nation, with its traditional impatience, for one great mentor. And you, troubled with your limbs too weak to represent the usual stronger build of a *Jumma* youth and your colour too dark for the common brightness of a *Pahari*, still adore and nurture, with holy waters of love and respect, your own tribal being.

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whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed.” In this chapter, she argues that despite submitting to the male dominance, the wives of Chughtai, Durrani and Hossain employ certain strategies to manipulate traditions and fight socially enforced taboos and restrictions. She points out that despite being at different geographical locations these writers share several markers of collective belonging. She further argues that despite different kinds of ordeals, these wives have the ability to improve their lot by changing the fixed tropes of identity construction attached to them.

Regarding a woman’s sexuality, the three authors that Dr. Khan writes on echo Carole Vance as they believe that a woman’s sexuality is “simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression and danger as well as of exploration, pleasure and agency.”

She concluded her talk with the mention of micro-mechanism of Harris Collette. According to Harris Collette, gossip is a micro mechanism of power that can help regulate moral action in society. Though gossip, rumour or scandal is not a radical mode of action, it builds sufficient moral surveillance in tight communities. In *Blasphemy*, Heer uses gossip as a strategy to avenge her Pir (religious guru) husband who is a sexual molester and fraud. After his death she reveals the real identity of ‘Pyari’ to the men with whom her husband had forced her to sleep. She also sells copies of their sex videos to a Pathan in order to spread the word about her husband’s true nature. In her own life Durrani herself tried to harness public opinion against her former husband through scandalous exposure and gossip in order to counter his violence and extra marital affair.

The talk was held on Wednesday, 26 January 2011. At the end, Professor Razia Sultana Khan, Head, Department of English and Department of Modern Languages thanked the speaker for her stimulating talk and others for their presence. Professor Nazrul Islam, Director, School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences and Dr. Tanvir A. Khan, Registrar of IUB also attended the lecture.

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(The final part of Tagore’s The Golden Deer will appear next week).