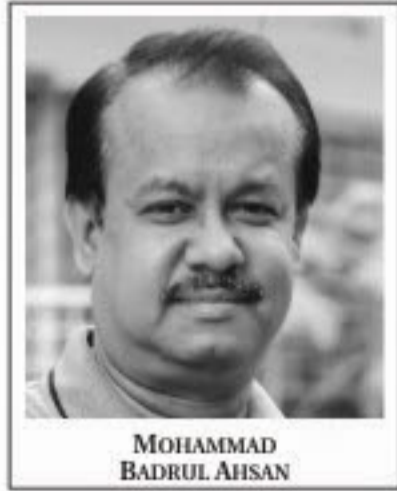


CROSS TALK

Fighting over fig leaves



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL HOSSAIN

SOME men always tend to forget, or they don't bother to remember, that behind each of them breathing, there is a woman who gave birth to

him. It is said there is also a woman behind every successful man. Smart alecks often joke there is more than one woman behind every miserable man. The purpose of saying all these is neither to glorify nor demonise women. It is simply to recognise that they surround men. In all fairness, men also surround them.

Ever since a naked couple was expelled from heaven, this world has grown very wicked. For a while let us think all the men and women are withdrawn except for one of each kind left to inhabit this earth. Imagine lonely nights and desolate days for this couple, which was exactly how Adam and Eve started life.

Behind the closed doors of every bedroom that primordial episode is still repeated in modern settings. Every conjugal life is a slice of that Edenic enterprise that promoted companionship between male and female under one sky. It was preordained that they would comfort each other against the hardships in life.

Instead, that commiseration has turned into confrontation. In 2009, the World Health Organization conducted a study in 10 countries including Bangladesh. It showed that as high as 71% women reported physical or sexual violence by a husband or partner. It further revealed that the first sexual experience of as high as 40% women was not consensual. Every year, family members in the name of honour murder about 5,000 women around the world.

A UNFPA study in 2005 found that in Asia, at least 60 million girls were "missing" due to prenatal sex selection, infanticide or neglect. Each year,



The International Women's Day was observed on March 8. It reminded us that Adam and Eve have raised a family of over six billion children. These children are fighting over the fig leaves, not the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.

an estimated 800,000 people are trafficked across borders -- 80% of them women and girls.

True, the Adams and the Eves of the subsequent eras have transformed. Genetically coded to covet each other, the genders have engaged in conflict. Not mere lovers' spats or domestic squabbles. For hundreds of years women have been victims of male chauvinism.

Then we have got a different kind of transformation. Gays and lesbians have surfaced as garden variety of fatal attractions. They defy the law of magnetism, opposite poles don't always attract and the like poles don't always repel. But exception only proves the rule. Proliferation of the

human race is still handled in the old-fashioned way. It still takes two of the original kinds to do that existential tango.

Ernest Jones writes in Sigmund Freud: Life and Work that the great explorer of the mental universe himself was bogged in his doubts about women. "The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is 'what does a woman want?'" Freud wrote.

But critics don't like to give much credence to this understander of understandings who failed to understand women. Freud was opposed to the emancipation of women. The

master of modern psychology firmly believed that women's lives were dominated by their sexual reproductive functions. He was short of saying that women were no more than a life support system for their reproductive organs.

One of the most enlightened minds of our times, Freud exemplified how bitterly men are prejudiced against women. And the walls of that prejudice are guarded by the demons of a disturbing complex, rooted in the dark recess of the male cortex. The male ego is regularly fed on the ominous diet that his is the superior of two genders.

Bad news for these supremacists, nature is coming after them. The world's leading scientists have confirmed that a host of common chemicals are having "gender-bending" effects on males of vertebrate animals from fish to mammals, including humans. These chemicals include phthalates, used in food wrapping, cosmetics and baby powders among other applications; flame retardants in furniture and electrical goods, and many pesticides.

Research has also found that pregnant women exposed to widespread chemicals gave birth to baby boys with smaller penises and feminised genitals. About 250,000 babies who would have been boys were born as girls instead in the US and Japan alone. Studies in more than 20 countries showed that sperm count amongst men has dropped from 150 million per milliliter of sperm fluid to 60 million over 50 years.

The International Women's Day was observed on March 8. It reminded us that Adam and Eve have raised a family of over six billion children. These children are fighting over the fig leaves, not the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Genesis has culminated in a gender crisis.

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Under-staffed missions

Skilled, competent diplomats needed

FOREIGN Minister Dipu Moni states that as many as forty three Bangladesh missions abroad are faced with a shortage of manpower. Her assessment is simple, which is that such a shortage is impeding the provision of adequate services to non-resident Bangladeshis. The manpower structure under which the missions have been operating, the minister reminds us, was approved way back in 1982. Obviously, in today's circumstances there needs to be a change in the structure, as Dr. Moni appears to be suggesting. We do not disagree with her where revising the structure is concerned.

But then comes the issue of whether this shortage can be cited as an excuse for the poor services our missions have provided to Bangladeshis in dire need. Over the years, there have been regular complaints about the inability or sheer reluctance of our diplomats to come to the aid of distressed Bangladeshis abroad. Not long ago, loud protests were voiced about the mission in Kuala Lumpur failing to help our migrant workers in trouble. Most recently, the plight of Bangladeshis in crisis-torn Libya has reminded us yet once again of the serious failings of our missions. The point, therefore, is not so much whether our missions are under-staffed as it is of whether they are manned by skilled and accomplished personnel able to respond to the needs of Bangladeshis and are capable of projecting a positive image for the country through diplomacy. For a fairly long period, successive governments in Dhaka have emphasized the importance of economic diplomacy on the part of our missions. To what extent such a policy has been successful remains a question.

Clearly, our diplomatic establishment is in need of refurbishing through placing the right people in the right places. In recent years, appointments of diplomats, professional as well as political, have raised a good number of questions about their ability to do the job. Diplomacy cannot flourish on the strength of political loyalty. It can do so on the basis of professional and intellectual competence.

Of course, we are all for providing our missions, where needed, with adequate staff. Simultaneously, there are missions abroad that are surfeit with manpower which is a drain on meager national resources. Must austerity as well as efficiency not come in here?

Busting market syndicate

Action, not mere words expected

PRIME minister Sheikh Hasina has again warned of tough action against unscrupulous traders' syndicates and hoarders behind artificially hiking up essentials prices and creating food grain crisis in the market. Earlier too she on different occasions had issued similar warnings against dishonest traders. To all appearances, the prime minister's tough words have been lost on the coterie responsible for hoarding and various kinds of market distortion. Because so far the prices of daily essentials have hardly shown any sign of coming down.

True, the government has taken different measures like importing food grains, open market sales (OMS), fair price cards, safety net programmes and so on to control essentials prices as well as protect the vulnerable sections of the population. But such measures, too, have left little impact on the market.

In the circumstances, rather than using only tough words against unprincipled traders and market manipulators, the government should apply the anti-hoarding law as well as other strict legal measures on the ground.

Is this market mafia so powerful that they can defy the government, especially its law enforcing agencies, with such impunity? Strangely, they have managed to survive the successive governments unscathed. What is the source of their strength, one wonders?

The government needs to strike the market manipulators and syndicates at their roots. It is not unlikely that a nexus has developed between these syndicates and certain shady quarters within the government. And that this nexus provides the market manipulators with an apparent invincibility so much so that they are able to escape the law without any difficulty.

But these unscrupulous wheeler-dealers distorting the market should be ferreted out from their safe dens and held to account. And it is time the government demonstrated its will to bust the nexus through matching its words with action and

Clannish contagion

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

THE Middle East is in turmoil. Muammar's mayhem continues. His 42-year old regime is under siege but he will hold on as long he can and at any cost. Libya is his fiefdom and he flaunted his invulnerability by promoting his clan of a loyal army, his obsequious supporters and his sons Saif-al-Islam and Mutassim.

A 28-year old Col., Muammar Gaddafi, aided by brotherly clan of army officers brought down King Idris, a protégé of the Italians. As the years went by he became a flamboyant and formidable arbiter of the fate of Libya. This happens when a country is affected by clannish contagion.

The Tahrir Square mass upheaval that brought Mubarak down after a 29-year rule was a victory of the national awakening of the people of Egypt. Such was his firm hold that a senile person of his condition held on as long as he could, and no matter how many lives were lost, believing that the mass upsurge would weaken. He was grooming his son Gamal for succession.

Mubarak was much obsessed with the idea of passing on the mantle to his clan member. For that he had to show that he was very much in control. But the people's will when it rises is far stronger than an autocrat's unyielding stand. The world will wait to see whether Egypt can resolutely rid itself of clannish contagion and fortify itself against its return.

Tunisia is a Francophone country where another clannish patrician, Habib Bourguiba, ruled for a long period. The deposed Zine-al-Abidine Ben Ali was a member of that clan. Bourguiba cultivated a western outlook in the country. Yet the country was caught in the legacy of autocracy. Middle East is such a place where one clan is supplanted by another clan. It

would be premature to predict about the restructuring in the region.

Abdullah, the present ruler of Jordan, is a descendant of Emir Sayyid Hussein bin Ali, once the custodian (Sharif) of Mecca. Emir Sharif lent support to the British in their war against the Ottoman Turks during the First World War. Later, Sharif was

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driven away by King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud the ruler of Nejd. The British planted them in Jordan.

King Abdullah depends on the clannish support of his Bedouin tribes, while the Palestinians are on the other side. The Palestinian refugees were once brutally suppressed by King Hussein. The embers of discontent have not died down in Jordan.

The Muslim World holds Saudia Arabia with regard because of the holy sites and the formidable power of its oil wealth. Its very name has a clannish profile descending from Saud tribe. The monarchy was wary of the ecclesiastical legacy of Caliphate and its founder Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud elected to be the King of Arabia and named it Saudi Arabia.

Their rulers maintain a calm exte-

rior but depend on stealth and unwavering resolve as their ruling regimen. They do not tolerate trouble in their corridor. Once one Juhair and his followers rose in revolt in Mecca; they were gunned down. Similarly, a demonstration of Shiite pilgrims was put down by force.

The point has been made. I need not talk of Suharto and his clannish family who ruled Indonesia for more than thirty years. What comes out of it is that the Muslim World, the Middle East in particular, has a dominant clannish contagion in its history and in the mindset of the rulers.

Bangladesh, even in a modest way, is not free of this contagion. The plainest fact is that its rulers are intolerant of the rise of contenders. They want to shine like the sun and want their clans to submit around them in loyalty and adulation. Anything wanting in it is a sacrilege.

This has been our fate since the birth of this country. The country has paid in blood and tears yet our rulers have not learnt anything from it. They all know it better, be they in power or out of power. Our prime minister bears the deepest scar in her heart and the leader of the opposition is not an exception. What could be more painful than doing to our founder and his family what the Pakistani hordes did to us?

Our only Nobel laureate Professor Yunus is battling adversity. The sacrilege he committed was to speak of joining politics during the period following 1/11. He did not pursue it, neither did he act on it with keenness. Rather it was soon forgotten in the political exercises of the clique in control.

Perhaps it lodged in the mind of our head of the government. She was already finding it difficult to reconcile to the rise of BNP, a party baptised in the cantonment. This is another per-

son from outside her clan and he has an international profile. He has been removed from his office of Managing Director of Grameen Bank.

She went berserk with improper remarks when the Norwegian report was aired, and she did not wait for his guilt to be proved. We grieve because of the ground she lost as a statesman when the Norwegian official report cleared Prof. Yunus of the allegation.

Besides the garments industry and remittance, micro-credit is another sector that is empowering the struggling people of Bangladesh. Grameen Bank now has 8.3 million members and the total number of micro-credit members is 30 million. The total savings reserve of Grameen Bank is Tk.10,000 crore. Is it a matter for capricious action?

Bangladesh has to get rid of this clannish contagion. We still remember how the leader of the opposition hounded out Professor Badruzzdoja Chowdhury, driven on by the members of her clan. He was framed as a possible contender. Later, she started grooming her eldest son.

The cause of the turmoil in the Middle East is the ravenous need of its rulers that their legacy outlives them. Remotely though, Bangladesh is similar to Middle Eastern countries in the need of our rulers that their legacies thrive. Our rulers live with a mindset driven by rage against the opponents and fear of rise of possible contenders. These are the threats to their legacies.

Their frenzied followers sharpen their rage and arm their fears. They do not perceive that an opponent or a possible contender is an opportunity to bring the best out of them. Once they realise this it will mark the end of confrontational politics in Bangladesh.

The writer is a contributor to The Daily Star.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 11

1917

World War I: Baghdad falls to Anglo-Indian forces commanded by General Stanley Maude.

1941

World War II: President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs the Lend-Lease Act into law, allowing American-built war supplies to be shipped to the Allies on loan.

1942

World War II: General Douglas MacArthur abandons Corregidor.

1945

World War II: The Imperial Japanese Navy attempts a large-scale kamikaze attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet anchored at Ulithi atoll in Operation Tan No. 2.

1971

Awami League General Secretary Tajuddin Ahmed thanks the people for their cooperation in making the popular movement a success. He issues new directives on the administration on behalf of AL.

1977

The 1977 Hanafi Muslim Siege: more than 130 hostages held in Washington, D.C., by Hanafi Muslims are set free after ambassadors from three Islamic nations join negotiations.

1983

Pakistan successfully conducts a cold test of a nuclear weapon.

1985

Mikhail Gorbachev becomes the Soviet Union's leader. 1990 Lithuania declares itself independent from the Soviet Union.