

NOSTALGIA

RAZIA KHAN AMIN

She walked softly by . . .

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Razia Khan Amin was the one of the first teachers who enlightened us at Dhaka University on English literature. That was early in October 1975, barely two months into a situation where Bangladesh teetered on the brink of chaos. Bangabandhu had been assassinated and we who had entered university suddenly found ourselves in conditions where the country was on a steep slide to regression. On that first day, apart from speaking to us of literature, Razia Khan Amin reflected on the violent political change that had taken place. Neither she nor we had any way of knowing on that October morning that our national tragedy had just begun. In a month's time, the leading lights of the Mujibnagar government would be dead. Some of the bravest of our war heroes --- Khaled Mosharraf, Shamsul Huda, ATM Haider --- would die too in a country they had fought so hard, and so successfully, to liberate. On that morning, my teacher mused loudly before her new students. Do you see what is happening to the country? She placed the emphasis on that 'to'. Some of us quickly noted that she had calmly left out the verb 'in', which said a good deal about her feelings. But, of course, at that very greenhorn stage in life, we were perhaps too naive to comprehend the nuance in Amin's statement. But it did give us that certain feeling that here was an academic not quite willing to look away from politics at a time when so many others were either too traumatised to speak of politics in public or too afraid to make their feelings known. Razia Khan Amin was different. On that first day, as on subsequent days, she made it a point to depart from the text to let us in on certain higher stages of thought. In those early days as a student in the English department of Dhaka University, my interest in Razia Khan Amin was enhanced by the knowledge that she was the daughter of Moulvi Tamizuddin Khan. In my early days in school --- and that was in 1963 --- when it was a thrill knowing that Tamizuddin Khan, as speaker of the Pakistan national



assembly, took charge as the country's acting president every time President Ayub Khan left on a tour of foreign shores. The image of a sober-looking, bearded politician, one who appeared to be an object of universal respect, was what impressed me even at that early point in my life. I recall reading of Tamizuddin Khan's death that year. There were other deaths that year which were to leave indelible impressions on me. Mohammad Ali Bogra went the way of all flesh and so did Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. In distant America, John F. Kennedy's life was brought to a swift end

by an assassin. It was all this I recalled every time Razia Khan Amin walked into the classroom with that no nonsense attitude of hers. I will confess that I seem to have always lived in a sort of beautiful fear of her. I cannot explain that, but even after I left university and moved into middle age with something of alacrity, that irritating thing called fidgeting always took hold of me every time I ran into her at some place or the other. The irony, though, is that she always seemed to be trying to bring me out of my stiffness. At a certain point, the department decided that she would be my tutorial teacher for that year. It was with absolute dread that I appeared every week for my tutorials with her. Apart from my general state of nervousness, I guess it was the fear that she might put to me questions quite beyond the scope of the text she enlightened me on which kept me in a state of alert. And yet somewhere inside me there was this recurring idea of how serious and modern a teacher Razia Khan Amin was. She left me stuttering even as I tried to say 'thank you' to her one day on the corridor before the department seminar library. I had written a small article on Raja Rao for a departmental journal. And here she was, making it a point to stride up to me to say that she had liked the write-up. She made my day. And she was the only teacher to give me that kind of feedback on my article. But should I have been surprised? She was, besides being a teacher at the university, a writer. Her fiction was bold, clearly in the feminist mould. Her handling of relations between men and women in her fiction was pretty unconventional in the sense that she refused to throw up stereotypes in literature. The bottomline was obvious: literature for Razia Khan Amin, whether it was hers or that which she taught in class, had to be lived if it was to be understood at all. As she walked down the corridor to a class or back to her office after a lecture, you could sense the creative imagination working in her all the while. Lost in thought, a half smile playing radiantly on her, she walked softly by. A

considerably good number of years after I left university, it occurred to me that there was something of a Susan Sontag in Razia Khan Amin. Or it could have been the other way round. Both women brought passion into their thoughts. Both were happy in holding forth strongly on the intellectual issues of their times. There was too an innocence about Razia Khan Amin. At an annual gathering of departmental alumni once, she spotted me speaking to a woman who had been my classmate and therefore her student. She drew the conclusion that the woman was my wife and cheerfully told us how happy she was to see us both happy in marriage. Neither my friend (for whom I had indeed composed poetry in vain at university) nor I had the heart to clarify the situation. We mumbled a thank you together. I nearly stuttered. A couple of years later, on another occasion, as I conversed with another young woman who had been in the English department, Amin came up, said hello in that calming way and asked me if the woman was my wife. This time I was a trifle bolder and answered her in the negative. She had quite forgotten, until she was reminded of the fact, that that young woman had been, like me, her student. The night thickens in deeper circles of darkness as I write. My teacher's mortal remains will not be placed in her grave until the arrival of a new day tomorrow. That voice which resonated with the profundity of imagination in the classroom long ago, the intellectual who gave us, on a platter as it were, food for literary thought --- that is the story which emerges from the mists tonight. Razia Khan Amin withdrew from public view quite a while ago. Tonight she has renounced a world she once made a little more meaningful for us in our ambition-laden youth. (Razia Khan Amin, academic, novelist, poet and critic, died on 28 December 2011)

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NON-FICTION

Seeing with the heart *Reflections of a 'Bangladeshi foreigner'*

JULIAN FRANCIS

About seven years ago, when Eid-ul-Fitr came quite close to Christmas, and it was interesting to observe the joy of festivities with family and friends and the giving and receiving of gifts. The giving is, of course, related to 'Zakat' by which, as I understand, 2.5% of one's 'disposable income' (e.g. cash, savings and jewellery) should be given away, once a year, to the extreme poor and orphans. As a foreigner living and working in Bangladesh, I see similarities between Eid and Christmas, such as the family coming together at a special time of the year, special foods, the joy of giving and remembering those who have very little. My work in 2004 was connected with assisting the very poorest in a Government project, Adarsha Gram, which was assisted by the European Union and provided houses, homesteads and livelihoods to homeless and landless families, particularly those who have lost their homes through river erosion. Despite the many administrative and bureaucratic difficulties in managing such a project, the experience is enriching as well as humbling. I continue to work with the same category of extreme poor people with the DFID and AusAID supported Chars Livelihoods Programme in the north west of the country. Over those years with Adarsha Gram, I commuted from my comfortable apartment in Banani to the project's office in Nilkhet passing the five-star Sonargaon Hotel twice a day. At the nearby roundabout, two young girls with disabilities would greet me on most days with bright eyes and smiling faces offering bunches of flowers or tea towels in return for some taka. In a way, they became part of my extended family and part of my routine. The joy of giving clothes to them at Eid is difficult to explain. One of the two girls cannot see in one eye and the other cannot speak at all. Their fathers abandoned the families blaming the

respective mothers for giving birth not only to daughters but to daughters with disabilities. The two girls lived in very poor unhygienic dwellings, so their happy smiling faces were all the more remarkable. The reader may be wondering where these rambling thoughts of the heart are going to take him or her! It was a coincidence that seven years ago I was taking part in Dhaka Stage's production of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol which was published in the week before Christmas in 1843. The book was written by Dickens drawing on his own experiences of growing up in very poor family circumstances. His father had been imprisoned for being in debt and Charles was taken out of school by his mother and was sent to a shoe polish factory at the age of 12 years and earned 6 shillings a week. The book was written at a time when there was much poverty in Victorian London, much child mortality and, until a proper sewer system was completed in 1875, there were frequent outbreaks of cholera and other diseases. A Christmas Carol is about a businessman, Ebenezer Scrooge, who is a penny-pinching miser in the first degree. He cares nothing, for the people around him and mankind exists only for the money that can be made through exploitation and intimidation. He particularly detests Christmas which he views as 'a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer'. Scrooge is visited, on Christmas Eve, by the ghost of his former partner Jacob Marley who died seven Christmas Eves ago. Marley, a miser from the same mold as Scrooge, is suffering the consequences in the afterlife and hopes to help Scrooge avoid his fate. He tells Scrooge that he will be haunted by three spirits. These three spirits, the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future, succeed in showing Scrooge the error of his ways. His glorious reformation



complete, Christmas morning finds Scrooge sending a Christmas turkey to his long-suffering clerk, Bob Cratchit, and spending Christmas day in the company of his nephew, Fred, whom he had earlier spurned. Scrooge's new-found benevolence continues as he raises Cratchit's salary and vows to assist his family, which includes Bob's disabled son, Tiny Tim. In the end Dickens

reports that Scrooge became 'as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew'. Dickens' description of the Christmas holiday as "a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of other people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys" should be the very essence of Christmas today, not at the greedy commercialized level, but in people's hearts and homes. The first night of Dhaka Stage's A Christmas Carol was at a fundraising dinner at the Sonargaon Hotel, raising funds for the Friendship Floating Hospital which criss-crosses the rivers of Bangladesh and is a hospital reaching out to the very poorest. Wherever it is moored, at least 200 patients line up each day to see the hospital's doctors, who are ready with a six-bed ward, an X-ray machine and facilities for obstetric and gynecological treatment. It was set up in hopes of reaching the isolated poor who would ordinarily never see a hospital and often have lost their land on small river islands due to erosion. As I have been associated with Bangladesh since 1971 my friends sometimes refer to me as a 'Bangladeshi foreigner' and I hope that connecting all these feelings, observations and senses of my heart makes some sense and will encourage people to reach out to those who have less, not just at particular times of the year such as Eid and Christmas, but always.

(JULIAN FRANCIS, WHO HAS HAD A CLOSE ASSOCIATION WITH BANGLADESH SINCE 1971, IS PARTNERSHIP'S DIRECTOR OF THE DFID AND AUSAID SUPPORTED 'CHARS LIVELIHOODS PROGRAMME' WORKING WITH THE EXTREME POOR IN THE JAMUNA, BRAHMAPUTRA, TEESTA AND PADMA CHARs).

LETTER FROM BOSTON

Reading short stories

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

A few weeks ago, I received a call from Manishadi. It was a Sunday evening and I was absorbed in the popular reality show "The Amazing Race". I picked up the receiver and squinted to read the caller ID. Manishadi does not call me often, so I was pleasantly surprised to see her name on the caller ID. As the phone rang for the fourth time, I hastily pressed the on the headset before the answering machine could kick in. It was Manishadi indeed, and after pleasantries, she invited me to a literary event which she informed me was taking place for the first time in Boston: an afternoon of Bangla short story reading, or Chhoto Golpo Dibash as it was to be called.

Assam to Boston, with detours to Colorado, California, and Switzerland. Her partner in many of Lekhoni's endeavors is Gouri Datta, a tireless organizer, writer, healer (as a practicing psychiatrist) and patron-saint of the arts, who recently received the Gayatri Gamarsh Literary Award for short story. I was flattered that Manishadi had taken the trouble to call me personally to join the group of readers planning to meet at Swapna and Rahul Ray's house in bucolic Wayland. However, I must admit that I was a little disheartened when I realized that my role at the gathering was to be a listener only. But the feeling did not last for long--I convinced myself that I should not feel bad since I have never written any short stories in Bangla, and the invitation to join the writers was a good start and probably a good omen!

So, on December 11th, I showed up at the appointed time at "Ray Babur Bari" where I felt right at home as soon as I entered since I saw some familiar faces from past Poddoo Paath events. I don't how I passed the next two and a half hours while I was there--without walking around and continuously reading/texting messages on my cell phone, as is my Sunday afternoon favorite pastime--but I must say I was truly in a different world; for a moment with the village women who makes a living by entertaining other men (as in Manisha Roy's "Barbonita"), then with Shuvro as he reconnects with his long-lost love on Facebook ("Shampa's Kobita" by Niloy Mukherjee), or sometimes with the hapless women who is locked out of her office and frantically trying to persuade the guard to let her in (Swapna Ray's "Hum Tum")! A total of 17 short stories were read, and each had to meet the 700 word limit set by the sponsors. Rahul Ray, the host, not only emceed the event, but also was the enforcer of the sanctioned word limit. Not that some of the participants did not try to fool him by using complicated "juktakkhar" or by leaving out juicy pieces from the written version but articulated them orally to add more pizzazz during the story-telling. Others, like Swapna

Ray, went one step further and used MP3 files to add some sound effects to accompany her musically-trained voice! But all the Readers, both old and young, who came before the microphone read with passion. The stories, though different from each other, carried their own weight in terms of theme, style, structure, and articulation, as the titles, given in the next paragraph will reveal. The audience listened with interest and intent with their eyes and mind trained on the presenter. The titles offer a fascinating kaleidoscope of Bangla, Hindi and English, mixed in with our diasporic existence: "Bibhrat" (Rahul Ray), "Goru, Payesh o Mother" (Partha Pal), "Chhap" (Kunal Joardar), "Bhagyer Parihash" (Sajal Banerjee), "Ham tum ek kamrey mein band ho, aur chaabi kho jayey" (Swapna Ray), "Param Bir Chakra" (Kishanlal Chakrabarti), "Shampar Swapna" (Nilay Mukherjee), "Ruchira" (Madhuri Ray), "Mrityur Janmadin" (Shankar Nandi), "Moulik" and "Smarok" (Jayanti Bandopadhyay), "Barbonita" (Manisha Roy), "Asamapto Samikaran"

(Jayanta Nag), "Pratikriti" (Susmita Bando), "Ei jodi tomar bhalobasha" (Badiuzzaman Khan), "Jeeboner Ek Sandhyabela" (Soumitro Pal), "Bharatey" (Gouri Datta), and "Do Androids Have Dreams?" (Shankha Bhowmick). Rahul, as the emcee, did a commendable job maintaining a steady upbeat tone for the event. His idea of sequencing the readings by drawing names out of a fishbowl--added a mysterious and fairy-tale air of pleasant unpredictability to the occasion. Many compared his role with that of a conductor of an orchestra, marking time, signaling, turning pages, maintaining tempo, deciding on the breaks, forming a link between the performers and the audience, and contributing to the gestalt of the occasion. I later learned that this was the first Bengali Short Story Reading Day for Lekhoni, and Gouri promised that this event will be an annual feature going forward..

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