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Begum Sufia Kamal in 1971: The Poet at War

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In our adolescence we had not taken Begum Sufia Kamal's poetry very seriously. After all, we were the children of the sixties. Our literary sensibilities were framed by Pound and Eliot, Plath and Pasternak, Ginsberg and Neruda, Bishnu Dey and Jibananda Das, Subhas Mukhopadhyay and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Shamsur Rahman and Al Mahmud. We had little patience for the orderly meters, the lilting cadences, and the over-wrought rhymes that marked the poetry of our earlier generations. Farrookh Ahmed, Ahsan Habib, Golam Mostafa, Jasimuddin, and others essentially followed the same poetic concerns and conventions, though Ahmed was more overtly Islamic, and Jasimuddin had carved out his niche in folkish pastoralism. We would often dismiss them as "versifiers" rather than as poets.

Like many of them, Begum Sufia Kamal (BSK) was also a poet of pastel shades, of blurry edges, of soft touches, of coy (if not cloying) sentiments, of elegant artifice rather than shrewd or unsettling insight. Unfortunately, this did not resonate with us. What we craved for was a more heroic (or anti-heroic) posture, a keener engagement with the existential angst we faced, a sharper response to the absurdity of bourgeois affectations and indulgences we saw around us, and a deeper understanding of the yawning insecurities that consumed us.

BSK did not subscribe to those "imperatives." She upheld a poetic stance and authorial authenticity that was more delicate, nuanced, and mannered. But, it was not part of our "scene" and, hence, alienating. It was much later that we began to appreciate the richness of her imagination, and the textual integrity imposed by her muse.

This was aided by our realisation that she demonstrated significant shifts in thematic and rhetorical directions. If her earlier *Sanjher Maya* (the Spell of the Eventide), published in 1938, was suffused with sweet melancholia -- a dreamy, gauzily ardent exercise in poetic whimsy (though it was charming and emotionally seductive in its own way) -- her later poetry (e.g. in *Mrittikar Ghran* -- the Fragrance of the Earth, published in 1970) began to reflect some of her concerns relating to human rights, economic justice and cultural autonomy, even though she did not stray far from her familiar literary moorings. If her persona as a public intellectual was defined by progressive and populist convictions, her poetry, for the most part, remained a bit discreet and tender. She appeared more saddened than appalled by what she encountered, more reproachful than rebellious, more a raised finger than a clenched fist.

But the poems written in 1971, and immediately after, were dissonant, grim, intense. This clearly demonstrated a radical break with the past in stylistic mannerisms and substantive focus. In these poems one could feel a quickening of her pulse, of being dislocated from her urbane and genteel constants, of grappling with a barely contained fury. In her passionate *cri de coeur* against the cruelties and humiliations unleashed by the Pakistani military, one could hear a mother's anguish, a humanist's anxieties and a patriot's anger. BSK's voice had finally become our own.

Some of these poems were published in English in 1975 through the efforts of her son Sajed Kamal, while most of the translations were undertaken by the poet's husband, the beloved and venerable, Mr. Kamaluddin Ahmed. The title of the book itself (*Where my Darlings Lie Buried*), is suggestive. It echoes the memorable response of the Sioux warrior chief when he was mockingly asked by the white colonialists, "where is your land?" and he stretched out his hand in a famous gesture towards the endless horizon and said: "Wherever my braves are buried is my land." This notion of a land

being consecrated by blood runs through the entire set of poems as a subtext that gives the English selection of her poems both coherence and vitality.

Even in her nature poems (*Chaitra, Baisakh, Jaistha, Sraban* and others), or those marking cultural events important to Bangalees (Falgun 8, Baisakh 25, Jaistha 11), the sight and smell of blood pervades the air, and overwhelms the senses. The rains cannot erase the stains, nor the memory of a cultural "moment" distract from this one over-riding, omnipresent reality. When the flowers blossom, it is not the shy *ketaki*, the fragile *bokul*, the dainty *juhi* that would grasp her attention, but the crimson *rokto korobi*, the flaming *krishnachura*, the flushed *polash* that would appeal with new meanings and messages. When she addresses the yearning bride, or the distressed mother, waiting for those who may not return, it is not to console but to inspire them to put their shoulder to the stone and endure (as Hemingway would have it), and also to push forward towards freedom and victory. Repeatedly, perhaps a bit impatiently, she reminds her audience that there is no time to fear death, no need for personal preening ("to braid their hair in patterns or put *kajal* in their eyes"), no more cause for tears. For her "the battle for life is on" and she exhorts the others to join.

This is not poetry dressed in a mourning sari with a black border, it is decked out in battle fatigues. When this "blood-dimmed tide was let loose upon the world" (as Yeats would say), it was more than a human tragedy that had to be overcome, it was a travesty that had to be challenged. And, BSK gathered up her wrath and contempt into a huge ball of spit, and hurled it against the perpetrators.

There is a directness of expression that is quite unprecedented for her. When she mentions the Pakistani military, there are no elliptical references or subtle allusions. The language is brazen. Thus they become "the devil's plunderous disciples/ covetous of money, mercenary, hated slaves/ malicious, mean and low, worst of beasts/ devoid of conscience/ like the hordes of Yazid/ who holding back the succor of God's Euphrates/ had massacred the fighters for truth and liberty ..." (Chaitra 31, 1377). Or in "Cave Dwellers Are We" she calls them "tricky hyenas (who) pounce upon humans/ to suck their blood in vengeance!" These ugly, covetous, treacherous beasts of prey/ have burned to ashes our green habitations/ and turned them into deserts dead." One can almost hear her cry out after Eliot's Gerontion: "After this knowledge, what forgiveness?"

But, one must also point out that, even as she condemns the savage criminality of the military, and even as she encourages the brave men and women to defiance and inevitable triumph, she does not demand crude reprisal against the enemy. While her descriptions of what the military had done, and the consequences that followed from its actions, were specific and often heart-rending, the response she wanted to

arouse was driven by her pursuit of moral redemption but not the need for physical exaction. The idea was to defeat the Pakistani military in order to end this long nightmare, but not to humiliate the military personnel as people. In her mind this retaliation in kind (doing to them what they had done to us) would entail an ethical and spiritual failure. Even in her rage, BSK could not bring herself to abandon her essential humanity.

In this regard a further clarification is in order. Obviously, these poems were not anti-war in the sense of decrying the banality of evil, the idiocy of human conflict, or the immorality of the death of innocents. But, they were not pro-war either. She never extols the virtues of war, but only upholds the nobility of resistance. Since she had always been unafraid to protest injustice and oppression, and both had been

unleashed on her people, she felt that the right to self-defense was both justifiable and necessary. Her position was not an exercise in convenient moral improvisation. It was firmly grounded in "just war" doctrine, and was entirely consistent with the example of the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the teachings of the Quran. The choices were fairly clear. Either one fights, or one faces extinction in terms of identity, culture and being. And, no people deserve to die.

The poems are remarkable for several other rea-

sons. A historical continuity informs the entire narrative. There is a mindfulness of an evolutionary progression from the Language Movement in 1951, through other struggles, into the inevitability of this conflict. For a generation that had believed in Pakistan, had been complicit in its formation, and had genuinely hoped for its success, this realisation could not have come easily. The argument is not that Pakistan was a wonderful idea that was handled in a clumsy manner, or that everything would have been fine had it not been for the power-hungry narcissism of Zulfi Bhutto and the callous blunderings of Yahya Khan, but that the entire project had been problematic from the start. To acknowledge that some of them had misread the historical forces that led to the creation of a tenuously based and awkwardly constructed Pakistan must have admitted some self-doubt, and required some self-interrogation. But, she was honest enough to undertake it.

There is a fond adulatory poem addressed to Indira Gandhi. This is written almost like a mother expressing gratitude to another who had helped to feed, shelter, and strengthen the millions of her own who had been forced to flee their country. She says: "O mother bird! Kind and brave soul!/ You greeted them/ Taking them under your strong wings/ you relieved them of fear, reached grains/ to their hungry mouths/ and gave homely comfort to the child and the decrepit" -- (To Sreemati Indira Gandhi). Perhaps, the language may be a bit excessive at times ("If today the dark deep night is over/ O incarnate of Shakti, it is a gift from you"). But, what is important is her complete indifference to the

political implications of what she was saying and her preoccupation, as always, with stating what she felt was right. As one woman to another, she was graciously declaring her indebtedness. And, if this was unpopular with those more cynical, more sceptical of India's role, or more critical of Ms. Gandhi herself, it mattered little to her.

But, if there is one poem that is startling for its perspicacity and audacity, it is the one dedicated to, indeed directed at, My Rasool (My Prophet). The questions she raises are sharp and, for some, uncomfortable. She asks -- how can people "on the pretense of protecting Islam" be "trampling your flag of truth and peace under their boots" in the manner of "Firaon and Shaddad?" She asks: "Are you of Arabia alone? Have you not filled/ the hearts of Bangla in millions?/ Tell me: Aren't you a prophet of all humanity?" She asks: "Are they Muslims?/ In their hands/ your flag is blackening in sorrow/ and being humiliated." And finally, she entreats: "O my prophet, I beseech you/ Be kind enough to pray to the great God of all domains/ that humanity regain its self again." The word "humanity" in the last line could easily have been substituted with the word "Islam."

In the context of the fact that that many Pakistanis had expressed some disdain about the identity, understanding, or devotion to "genuine Islam" that Bengalis seemed to represent, and the fact that the cultural habits of Bengali Muslims were usually considered to be deviations from the norms and practices of the faith, this poem reverses that logic, and invokes the Prophet's name with edgy effect. At one level her questions are quite simple -- who is a real Muslim, who speaks for Islam, and with whom would the prophet stand? But at another she poses a more complex and abstract query -- what is the relationship between the universality of the faith, and the particularity of disparate traditions? To what extent can people embrace their religion in all sincerity, and remain embedded in their own culture in candour and comfort? Must a good Bengali end for a good Muslim to begin?

BSK negotiated these paradoxes in her own life with dignity, integrity, and complete self-assurance. She fulfilled many different roles in her life, as a devout Muslim, loving wife, trusted friend, wise aunt, romantic poet, engaged activist, public conscience, political symbol, and reliable bulwark of various reformist causes and institutions. She performed all of them with humility, courage, and honour, seamlessly weaving them into a meaningful pattern. However, I suspect that if she was asked how she would like to be remembered most of all, she probably would have responded, "as a mother." This sentiment is powerfully evoked in the title-poem in the collection when she refers to the martyrs:

*No, I shall not disturb them  
in their slumber  
I shall leave for them, instead  
a kiss on the green mounds.  
As I touch the grass tenderly  
I seem to feel the clasp  
Of millions of eager hands,  
And millions of eager voices  
Speak to me:  
Don't you feel proud of us Mother  
That we have liberated our Bangladesh?*

Whether the "Mother" refers to the homeland itself (after all, it is capitalised), or the poet (after all this is written in the first person), is perhaps unclear. However, almost everyone who knew her would say that the ambiguity was both natural and deliberate.

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Begum Sufia Kamal

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Adaptation to climate change: An emerging science



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ADAPTATION to climate change is growing rapidly around the world both in practice as well as in the research community. This was amply demonstrated at the

recent International Conference on Adaptation Futures held at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona in the United States of America from May 29 to 31. There were over 700 participants from all over the world, including a significant number from developing countries, and over two hundred papers were presented on various aspects of adaptation.

This was in fact the second international conference on Adaptation Science with the first having been held in Australia in 2010. These Adaptation Science conferences will now be held

every two years under the aegis of a major new scientific initiative on vulnerability, impacts and adaptation to climate change called PROVIA, which is jointly supported by Unep, WMO and Unesco. The next conference will be held in Fortaleza, Brazil in 2014.

The Adaptation Futures conference in Tucson signified a rapid development of our understanding of adaptation science in several ways. A few are described below:

**Some early lessons from Adaptation Science:**

Firstly, adaptation to climate change is no longer seen as only something that concerns poor developing countries. There is now considerable attention being paid to adaptation in richer countries as was demonstrated by presentations from the

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*With continued support to carry our research on adaptation to climate change Bangladeshi researchers have the potential to make an even bigger contribution to the next Adaptation Science conference.*

US, Europe, Japan and a large number from Australia, which is perhaps taking adaptation most seriously.

The second significant finding was that in order to carry out research on adaptation the academic researchers cannot do it alone as adaptation is a learning-by-doing process and hence there needs to be close collaboration between the researchers and practitioners. The Arizona conference had many more practitioners than the previous meeting in Australia.

The third emerging issue is the potential for genuine collaboration on an equal footing between researchers from developed and developing countries as the former have access to higher levels of technology but the latter have the experiential knowledge.

Adaptation science thus has the potential to find synergies between top-down and bottom-up research.

**Bangladesh's role:**

It was interesting to note that Bangladesh featured in significant ways at the conference in Tucson.

There were a number of papers presented on Bangladesh by a combination of Bangladeshi researchers studying or working in USA, Europe and Australia, foreign researchers who had done their

field work in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi researchers working in Bangladesh from Buet and Khulna University.

The organisers of the conference in Arizona provided funding for fifty young researchers from developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America on a competitive basis depending on the quality of the abstracts submitted. The largest cohort from a single country was from Bangladesh.

Thus, Bangladesh is beginning to make its mark on the global adaptation science scene.

With continued support to carry our research on adaptation to climate change Bangladeshi researchers have the potential to make an even bigger contribution to the next Adaptation Science conference.

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