

REMEMBRANCE

# My soft-spoken, elegant friend

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

It was a declining afternoon back in 2001 when Rashida Muhiuddin called. She sounded happy, to the point of being thrilled. Could I come over to her Sheraton office for tea? Within the next half hour I was there. She was radiant, with that serene beauty in her giving off a glow of contentment. She had just been nominated by the Awami League for a Jatiyo Sangsad seat in Muktagachha and in celebration wished to share the moment with her friends. I thought myself fortunate in being one of them. For the next hour, we talked of her plans. She was going on leave from Sheraton, where she had headed the public relations department for years. She clearly looked forward to winning that seat in Parliament, but if she lost, she would be back at work where we sat talking. On the walls were a good number of photographs. Rashida was in all of them, welcoming high profile visitors to Sheraton over a period of years.

On that day, Rashida Muhiuddin seemed to be bursting with energy. In my heart, I hoped she would win, for she would make a good, enlightened, graceful presence in Parliament. As I stood up to leave, we shook hands and I told her I would do all I could to help her in her campaign. A certain kind of brilliance shone in her eyes. Before the week was out, I had prepared a piece on her for the newspaper I was working for at the time. I called it 'My friend the candidate'. She was happy. She called to say she was touched and indeed copies of the article had already gone up on walls in her constituency. In the course of the campaign, she would call to say how encouraged she was at the popular response to her candidacy. Here was a young woman, urbane and urbanised, who was busy creating her own niche in the rough and tumble of politics in rural Bangladesh. She was quickly overcoming opposition to her within the local Muktagachha Awami League and seemed headed for victory at the polls. In the event, she lost. Or

was made to lose. It was a year of disaster, for her and for her party. Rashida was certain victory had been stolen from her and for a very long time could not bring herself to face the fact that her rival had triumphed, in however questionable a way, over her.

Rashida Muhiuddin's sadness took on a deeper hue when she realised she was not welcome at Sheraton any more. Her party had slipped from being the government into being the opposition. Perhaps the new regime, in an act of malevolence, did not want her back at her old workplace? And per-



haps the management of the hotel, acutely conscious of the need not to arouse the ire of the new ruling class, did not wish to embarrass itself by asking Rashida back in? In those months of growing frustration, Rashida realised that the only way she could keep herself going was to stay in politics. It was often late in the day that she called, to tell me of the many frustrations she was going through. And yet, she said, she felt she owed it to her constituents to keep the faith they had reposed in her despite the fact that she had not made it to Parliament. Like any seasoned politician, she made it a point to visit Muktagachha on a regular

basis and thereby earned enough respect and support to be regarded as her party's voice in the region. And then there was the night when she called, only for me to hear her sobbing at the end of the line. Recovering in a minute or so, she stunned me with the news that she had earlier in the day seen her brother buried. It was a situation where I had no words to comfort her. She hung up, but before she did so I told her I would keep in touch.

My early acquaintance with Rashida Muhiuddin came through watching her read the English news bulletins on Bangladesh Television. Then, sometime in July 1996, she and I found ourselves as part of a team previewing a documentary prepared by the new Awami League government elected to office a month earlier. That was our first meeting; and it was to be followed by many more. She was happy when I went off to London in early 1997 as media spokesperson at the Bangladesh High Commission. On regular visits home, we would meet at her office. I would often wonder why the government could not place her in a position where she would be doing a lot more good for it and for the country.

I did not go to see my friend Rashida Muhiuddin after her death. I was not at her burial at the intellectuals' cemetery in Mirpur. But over these last few years I have thought of her, have prayed for her; and I have wondered why she had to go the way of all flesh so soon, so much before her time. The last time we spoke was when I called her on her mobile. She was busy at a meeting of her party workers in Muktagachha. This is a bad time to call, I told her. I promised to call later. She said she would call too. That was the last time we spoke to each other.

This morning, it is the soft-spoken, elegant Rashida Muhiuddin who comes alive in the crevices of the soul. She was a proper lady. The thoughts in her ran a beautiful course. And they underlined the self-esteem she based her life on. She speaks not a word these days.

# A rage for ragas

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

Ever heard a rooster during afternoons? It's not totally unheard of. But unusual, isn't it? It is a common phenomenon that roosters do crow at dawn and that also is heard mostly in the villages. The city has lost its charm of any natural music. How about a cuckoo cooing in the hot sultry summer afternoon? That too goes for a seasonal imbalance, as cuckoos do sing, but only in spring. How about the croaking of the toads or the hooting of the bats...these all have a discordant and eerily musical effect, creating uneasiness, doesn't it?

Now if that is not music, what is? Music is a melodious tune often hummed or played on the instruments. Once the tunes are set with 'words' it becomes a song. So songs are possible or sung only by humans.

Now what is a Raga? Ragas are in simple words our emotional expression either through the instruments or vocals depicting various 'moods'. This might be seasonal, or it may vary according to the time of day. As I said, it will be discordant if the rooster crows at any time other than dawn or if even the birds chirp en masse any time after dusk. This is because it will go against nature.

So ragas are basically set musical notes attuned with nature.

Let's compare a Raga with that of a flower in full bloom. Firstly, it has to belong to a particular species like a rose, a marigold or a dahlia. This can be compared to a gharana, meaning that it has certain characteristics and belongs to a certain school of thought. Gharanas or styles emerged from certain areas or developed according to certain Ustaads. This developed during the reign of Alauddin Khilji in the late 13th century. After the death of Mia Tansen, there emerged the Seni Gharana.

Just as the characteristics of a flower may vary from colour to its size; petals maybe round shaped or edged, fragrance could be mild or overwhelming; some bloom in autumn while others in monsoon or spring.

Similarly compared to gharanas some are styled with intricate filigree work like that of the Patiala gharana or Kirana gharana, the Tappa based Rampur or Lakshnao gharana, the Agra gharana to name a few. Some ragas are less complicated than the others.

While the petals begin to bloom, it can be compared to alaap in a raga. The alaap explains the mood of the raga. It is a prelude to the whole raga. Alaap is the tune expressed by the performer without lyrics. It is through the alaap that a musician begins to explore any raga. It helps one to understand the technical nuances and mystical depths.

This is followed by Bandish or the lyrics which are the visual presentation of the mood accompanied by a variety of rhythms.

If a raga is based on a season, for example the Megh,

it has the gentleness of a rainy season. Similarly, the raga Basant depicts the full flurry of spring --- the emotions of a lover. Ragas are categorised through different moods or ras like Sringaar (romantic), Korun (sad), Bir (heroic), Odhbhut (queer), Shanto (mild), Bibhotso (grim), Bathshollo (child-like), etc.

In ancient times Dhrupads reigned over the classical music scenario. Depth, control and combinations are the qualities of dhrupada music. But its slow tempo and style were soon over shadowed by Kheyal. Amir Khusro of the late 13th century was the propagator of the style. Kheyls were very popular with its regal lyrical beauty as it unfolded the various moods firstly in vilambit (slow) and later in drut (fast) rhythm.

Thumri and Tappa are the typical presentation of light classical songs. Its tunes are melodious, sweet and depict the emotional outbursts of a lover. These were sung mostly by songstresses at court and were known as Baigees.

The great masters Bade Gulaam Ali Khan, Amir Khan, Omkarnath Thakur, Bhimsen Joshi, Bala Murali Krishna, Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, Malkay Mousequi Rowshan Ara, Amanat Ali, Fateh Ali, Allah Rakha, Zakir Hossain and many more of the finest musicians have enriched pure classical music in the subcontinent.

'It is not just about knowing when the alaap ends and the composition begins or how many notes the ragas have, or about knowing which raga it is. It's about developing a psychological status. That demands love, attention and self forgetfulness.'

And just as the cooing of the birds has blended into our psyche, the ragas have over the ages, blended into our sense of what is truly a work of art.

Even though classical music has been a long cherished tradition in Bangladesh, one wonders if it is fated for an early death. There seem to be no meaningful local programs to excite young or mature listeners. But there is hardly any dearth in interest. Many of you will remember how a few years back, hundreds of people crammed into the Osmani Memorial Hall everyday on the aisles, on the seats, on the floor in front of the stage listening to the great masters of Indian classical music. From instrumentals of Allah Rakha, Zakir Hussain, Hari Prasad Chaurasia, Sultan Khan to the vocals of Jasraj, there was never an inch of space left in the hall.

Ragas, like the different melodies of nature, have an incredible range of compositions to appeal to all of one's emotions. But unless we make it more accessible to listeners, it will remain enigmatic and unappealing, not very different from the birds chirping long after the sun has set.

SADYA AFREEN MALICK, A LEADING NAZRUL EXPONENT, IS EDITOR, STAR ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT.

FICTION

# Oh, this ache of mine!

TULIP CHOWDHURY

Oh, this pain of mine, this pain in the heart! It just refuses to go away. Something seems to gnaw on and on in my heart. Someone seems to be piercing it with the tip of a sharp knife, to be trying to open an old wound over and over. I feel the pain, its so deep, deep inside. This pain of mine, it always makes my heart weigh like a thousand stones.

I can see my reflection in the mirror. My hair has grown salt and pepper. The curly hair grows wild all around my face. I seldom brush and tidy it up. My sister sometimes puts on oil on my hair and braids it up. The eyes have a look of being lost. They look at everything in a dull way, as if nothing stirs up any interest to bring in light into the dark eyes. The eyebrow is thick and bushy. I remember at one time I used to go to the beautician to have them shaped. But that is now history. The wide mouth droops at the corners. The sharp nose seems to stick up for nothing. When I look at the nose wonder how could it still manage to look so sharp when my inside was crumbling like sand piles! This pain has made my thirty years of life feel as if I have crossed seventy or so. I feel so old, so out of tune in this rolling world!

My sister is always making appointments with doctors, doctors who ask me more or less the same questions.

"Where is this pain? Is it in the chest?" they ask when Sis says I mention of a pain somewhere in my heart.

I clutch my chest and point to the heart and say, "The pain is inside, deep inside and it hurts!"

Then follow the usual routines. Have EKG, ECG, ETT and so many more tests of the heart. The doctors are surprised to see the reports. Everything is okay. The heart is very sound! Why the pain?

They look into my eyes. They see the troubled soul. It's all in the eyes. The eyes are supposed to be the mirror of the soul. The wild look, the momentary lost look and the confused self; so many expressions are there in those eyes. Suddenly the doctors seem to arrive at a conclusion and then they tell Sis,

"Maybe some psycho therapy would help, we have done a thorough examination of the heart and the rest of the body. She is fine...."

That makes me laugh. I laugh aloud and again clutch my chest and point to my heart,

"Doctor, the pain is too deep, you can't reach it, you can't cure it! Ah this pain of mine...ha...ha...ha..." I cannot stop the laughter. But and then suddenly the pain is too much and I start crying, break down with great sobs. I see lights getting dim, the walls around me seem to be closing around and I feel suffocated. I must get out of the doctor's room. I rush out. Sis follows me and links her hand with mine.

"Flora....Flora calm down. We will go home now." She says to me.

"I don't need doctors! How many times I have told you that?"

"Ok...ok...no doctors..." She promises to me. And then and there I know right on the next day she will drag me to that psycho therapist.

These sessions with the psycho therapist, they make me feel like a real lunatic. I tell them that I am not crazy, but their treatment of me makes me feel like one. They think I am out of my senses just because I don't eat right, don't dress right and spend sleepless nights just star gazing. But how can I tell them that when I do things in my own way I feel more in tune with my pain? When I punish myself in some way I feel as if the pain has a right to be there, as if it has come to stay with me for the rest of

me life. And feel an oneness with the pain, the pain that seems to squeeze the life out of me.

I will have the night to stay awake and see all my lost dreams rewind like a motion picture in the darkness of my room. Sis will come with all those sleeping pills. I take them in my hand and throw them into the wastepaper basket. I smile at Sis and say,

"Don't worry, another sleepless night won't make me any more crazier. Just let me be...can't you do that?"

Sis shakes her head, her brows knitted into a deep frown as if fed up with me. I just do not want her around me, I want to be left to myself.

Then finally comes my peace. Sis has gone to sleep. I sit in the balcony and look at the night sky. It's a clear autumn night. Wispy white clouds are floating over a full moon. Countless stars twinkle with their soft lights. When the others leave me in peace I am with my Shayaan, my lost Shayaan.

But and then, did I tell you about my Shayaan? Ah no, nor do I ever tell the doctors about him. Only two months back he was there in my life, filling each and every hour with his laughter and words. And then he vanished. We were in love. Listen, very much in love. He couldn't leave me but he did. My dark and tall Shayaan, my love with his dark eyes and manly features! He had told me countless times that he loved me and I saw that love deep in his eyes. Now where has my love gone? When love was there I had felt as if the world belonged to me, as if I was safe and secure. I had only to set my eyes on him, had only to hear his voice and I would feel as if heaven was there for me. Love had given me a place all my own in this huge world.

Tell me how am I supposed to feel when this love and the person; all vanish. They have left me with a pain, a dull pain that makes me almost numb to the rest of the world. The doctors can't see the knife that gnaws endlessly into my heart, the knife that opens up fresh wounds every minute. They see the lost me in my eyes, they see the aimless wanderer that inhibits the world now. They ask me to play tennis, to go to movies and have good times with friends and relatives. But how can I with this endless echo in my heart, "Shayan...where are you?".

I laugh, that crazy laughter that comes from my within because nobody can see my inside, nobody can feel the emptiness that suffocates me. I can hear Shayaan's voice calling me, calling me to his side. And then a huge bell clangs and brings me back to the reality. Shayaan is gone. He does not call me any more, does not seek me out any more.

"Doctor, you don't have to go with those test for this pain of mine....you just can't cure it....no doctor can.....ha...ha...ha..." I plead as my sister takes me from one doctor to another. I laugh and cry; all together.

This pain, for me or any other woman like me, when love is betrayed, the pain is not there to be healed.....it's a fire that is burning the inside out. There is one question to ask,

"Where has love gone?"

See the dark sky of this rainy day? There is more water behind my eyes than the whole day's rain. See the ocean flowing? There are hundred oceans behind my eyes. See those firewood burning? There is a greater fire in my heart. See the infinity of the sky? My heart is lost to a greater infinity. Oh this pain of mine..." "Doctor...please no more of these tests...it just won't go away. Oh, this pain of mine..."

This pain of mine will go the day my love comes back. Will he come? Someone tell me, will he come back?

TULIP CHOWDHURY WRITES FICTION.

POETRY

## Daughter Of The Soil

HUMAIRA HAQUE

I don't know  
where the  
Hudson river  
flows'  
Haven't seen  
even.  
I am the daughter  
of the soil ,.  
Where the  
Padma ,Meghna  
flows.  
Have seen the  
enormous water  
flows.

Seen the clouds  
spread shadows,  
Over the filths.

Whilst the  
maiden collects  
water  
Lost her own in  
her images.

The shepherd  
gives bath to the  
flocks,  
Purifies the  
body and soul of  
his own.

The undaunted  
boys-  
Jump and play  
in water with  
utmost joys  
In the air that  
flows.

Have seen the  
daughter in the  
veils,  
While the boat  
carries her from in  
-laws to parents,  
As she contem-  
plates under the  
hoods.  
Looking at that  
Another daughter  
lost her own  
Longing for  
parents home.

MUSINGS

# The pain of aging

SHAMIMA TANVEER

Pain and gain are related terms. "No pain, no gain" is a well-known proverb. Some pains are tolerable, some are not. We take painkillers, when our body needs to overcome pain.

Sometimes in our old age there is a feeling of pain, when we are in a vacant or lonely mood. As we grow old these pains grow with us. "No pain but champagne" – rhymes and sounds cheerful to our ears.

Recently while visiting America – I have noticed with more care than before – the lifestyles and determination of elderly women in particular and I find it very praiseworthy. I was impressed by observing their social life and their conduct in public places - that was all that I was exposed to. I noticed they were well-dressed and

hearts always beat to different tunes.

Ultimately a young vibrant woman turns into an old lady – having gone through the turbulence of giving birth to and bringing up children. Then seeing them grow, get educated, then one married off to a suitable boy and the other finding his own spouse and leaving home to build their own lives. The old lady is now also a mother-in-law in addition to being a wife and a mother – so the attachments the relationships, the bonds are still there.

The old woman in America seems to me to be free from many such bonds. She keeps herself busy and active, is fashionable, well dressed, drives her own car and lives her life of her own free will – which I guess comes from her financial independ-

ence. That, to me is obviously praiseworthy.

Social responsibility is a very important part of democracy in any country. In America social responsibility towards women, the elderly, the disabled is very noticeable to me and very much appreciated by me. People are always giving a helping hand to one another.

The pain of aging can be tolerated can be overcome with conscious effort. Old woman with a young heart – is a matter of determination. I think feeling young is important. Any important change must first come in the mind. We must take heed that "Life is nothing but a journey".

I recall the elderly lady (obviously above seventy) selling tickets at the movie theater – bright red lipstick looks nice on her. Her winning smile makes me think of the ABBA song "See that girl.....". She may not be the "Dancing Queen" but her positive attitude towards life definitely lessens her pain of aging. That is determination.

The pain of aging is nothing but a natural and normal process of a human body. We cannot possibly heal it but surely endure it by our determination to be happy and by leading an active life.

For us the elderly, it's best to take life lightly – to sing a song. Let's sing that song.....

SHAMIMA TANVEER IS A HOUSEWIFE AND MARRIED TO A BUSINESSMAN.

