

Uneven contest, not a classy debate

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

LET'S begin at the beginning: Lester Holt, thought to be a Republican by political belief (so what!) was appointed Moderator for Monday's first Hillary-Trump face-off at Hofstra University in New York by the National Commission for Presidential Debates. The NCPD, for short, is an independent, neutral and non-profit body tasked to organise the historic and democratically educative series of debates.

Even before laying out the format of the debate, the moderator spelled out a list of don'ts for the audience—'no clapping, no jeering or booing; nothing disruptive, just listening.' And, 'the otherwise politically simmering audience complied with the instructions almost to the last person. I say 'almost' because of a muffled 'shame' of a whimper at the mention of the e-mail issue dying out amid rapt attention in the hall room.

All this has a loud ring of familiarity with our televised talk shows or dialogue programmes where the audience is similarly representative but politically divided. And they often break into applause when someone on the panel says what they like to hear. In the reverse case they will even indulge in barracking against an unpalatable but reasonable opinion. All these reactions are along political lines, and hardly based on the merit of



ILLUSTRATION: STEVE BRODNER

the arguments put forward. One needn't labour the point too much about the importance of keeping quiet during verbal exchanges in a debate or face-offs. The debate was for 90 minutes but a reactive talkathon goes on, as it will till the last lap is taken by a winning contender as though in a marathon race. Taking lead through the first debate will matter, building up on it subsequently

even more so, yet somewhat like cricket 'it is not over till it's over'. There had been a long, eventful build-up to Monday's one-to-one face-off. This perhaps left you wondering what remained of the issues that have been dissected over and over again to offer new angles to the debaters, or curiosity to the audience. Thus, it was not so much about issues as it has been about personalities—their tempera-

ment, judgment, cool-headedness in turbulent times and the capacity to solve complex national and international problems. In terms of controversial baggage with which Hillary and Trump hit the campaign trail or indeed came to the debate there may be a prima facie comparison between them. Up close though, the same yardstick may not be applied in determining the degree or nature of wrongs they were supposed to have committed. For, Hillary had done so during her years in high office which would have obliged her to abide by an accountability procedure anyway. In real time what seems to have worked for Mrs Clinton is her admission of mistake about use of a personal server in e-mail communication and her implied iteration of not repeating it. This was topped up by the Congressional grilling for 11 hours that she went through vindicating her answerability to a system. It is not, however, extraordinary for secretaries of state to do the spade-work for striking an important inter-state deal through an informal channel that in all likelihood they have subjected to congressional vetting. Donald Trump is said to be good at connecting with people. But what does he connect the people with? Apart from his crazy policy statements, disruptive ideas and experimentalist bravado, the odds really stack up against him when he lays his claim to the White House on a credential of running a business, or trade successfully. His sale-point seems to solely rest on his confidence that he can extrapolate his business success into 'making America great again'.

Not surprisingly, the expectation that a hundred million Americans will watch the show; in reality the number was 80.5 million. If you take into account another research result, only middle aged to older groups watch the debates whilst younger people show an attention span for only 40 percent of the debate. Here are some gems of samples of decisive debates to use as benchmarks for gauging the classy nature of future presidential debates presented in a chronological order: 1960—Richard Nixon loses to J.F Kennedy in the first live televised debate after sweating profusely under studio lights; 1976—Gerald Ford loses after mangling a reference to Soviet domination over Eastern Europe in a debate against Jimmy Carter; 1980—Ronald Reagan highlights Carter's gloomy reputation by retorting ("there you go again" during an exchange over economics); 1984 Reagan parries a concern about his age by quipping that he would not use his rival Walter Mondale's youth and inexperience against him; 1988—In a debate with George Bush Senior, Michael Dukakis gives dry lawyer's answer if he would back the death penalty for a man who raped and killed his wife; 1988—Dan Quale loses after vice president rival L.Loyed Benston tells him that he is no JFK; 1992—Bush senior loses when he checks his watch in a three-way debate with Bill Clinton and Ross. Perot; and Al Gore loses by reputedly sighing as George W Bush speaks. (Cleansed from Sunday Times)

In terms of controversial baggage with which Hillary and Trump hit the campaign trail or indeed came to the debate there may be a prima facie comparison between them.

The writer is a contributor of The Daily Star. shahhusainimam@gmail.com

Won't we ever listen?

KABERI GAYEN

AKTAR Jahan and I were students of the same department in Dhaka University, and then colleagues of the same department in Rajshahi University. I left Rajshahi University in 2007. I had a good rapport with Aktar and her husband, who also belonged to the same department, and had presumed that Aktar was happy with him. Sawaad was their only child. Apart from being a good teacher, she was very much a family person.

Around 2011, I heard that Aktar and her husband had separated. I did not question the decision as I respected them both. There was nothing unusual about two people deciding to go their separate ways for personal reasons. Never in my wildest imagination did I think that Aktar would take her own life and that I would be writing about it.

When I first heard of the incident, I was appalled. Why would Aktar do something like this? She was an Associate Professor of a reputed public university with a good family background. She had a son. But after putting aside my disbelief, I noticed that not only the news of Aktar's sudden demise, but also some very sad accounts of her life narrated by her students, colleagues and close friends flooded the social media. I must admit that I did not know the recent developments in her life in detail. But I read her suicide note that was published in many mainstream newspapers the next day, and I think it says a lot.

Without knowing the extent of what she had been through, as described by her friends, colleagues and students after her death, one may understand from the short note that she had become exhausted - mentally and physically. The reasons are quite obvious. After an unhappy end to a marriage of many years, she only got custody for her child around May this year. She was also anxious about the safety of her child's life, as mentioned

in the note. Her son in a Facebook post confirmed that his father had indeed threatened his mother and him in two separate instances.

She requested that her body be given away to the RMC Hospital instead of being taken to her family in Dhaka, and it this final request that I find most depressing. It shows just how much she had withdrawn herself from the world!

She was brave, actually. Even after her divorce and her ex-husband's remarriage, she continued working in the same department as him. I saluted Aktar Jahan when I saw her picture with her ex-husband and his new wife taken at a departmental event. It seemed like she had managed to get over the trauma of separation and divorce quite well. But in truth, there is always much more in store for a divorced woman in our society.

From what her close friends have disclosed, she allegedly could hardly ever see her child despite staying on the same campus. Our laws still do not allow a mother to get the custody of her child after a certain age. She passed several years without being able to see her son whenever she wanted. Her son's Facebook status gives clear evidence of that. I do not know when our laws will become more humane. Many women in our country are forced to stay in abusive relationships just for the children's sake. They suffer even more after divorce over the custody issue. Women activists have been demanding a mother's right to have custody of her child for a long time but little has changed.

When Aktar started living alone, she perhaps needed proper psychological counselling. But our society and even education institutes are not equipped with such kind of facilities. People should have access to psychological counselling to get over of any kind of trauma, but in our culture, any sort of psychological counselling is nothing but 'treatment for madness'. We visit doctors for the slightest physical discomfort, but no matter how serious the state of our mental health, we hardly pay any attention to it. Getting

over a relationship is not always easy, especially if there is a child involved. Some professional help and some empathy are all that a person needs in such a situation. What hurts me the most is the description of her suicide. She made sure her suicide attempt was successful. I cannot even imagine what her mental state must have been that forced such a doting mother, who had finally got the custody of her child, to

them did not help her overcome the situation. Legal support, mental support and a strong voice against whatever injustice she had to put up with, could have helped her from meeting such an untimely end. Unfortunately, in the absence of any such support, she perhaps stopped trying to survive on her own.

In the beginning, I was swept away by a kind of sentimental blow of her

with the passage of time, I realised that not everyone is able to take the same kind of burden for long; especially, if the harassment continues after divorce, which is often the case. Well, those who can survive such storms are the winners. But won't there be a safety net for those who eventually become emotionally vulnerable in such situations? Thus, I hope the repeated allegations of harassment by her ex-husband are brought under investigation.

Also, we need to consider other provocations which we often ignore. For instance, why do conflicts within a marriage end up, in many cases, with the women feeling like there is no other escape except taking their own lives. When such incidents follow a pattern, I would rather call them structured killings.

If we carefully consider the suicide note, we can certainly see that it also tells a lot about other women who go through the same process: physical/mental pressure, anxiety for children's safety, and the feeling of alienation. Even economic independence cannot ensure their mental and physical safety. Families want their daughters to remain married, no matter how abusive a relationship they are in. Society ignores them, passing off their woes as trifling personal matters.

I see my student Sutapa's suicide, Shahjalal University professor Fahmida's suicide, Professor Rumana Manjur's gauged out eyes, and Rajshahi University student Sifat's suicide, reflected in Aktar's short note. Suicide has never only been an individual effort. Many reasons at the personal-family-community-society levels lead one to such drastic action. Our apathy is the biggest ally to these structured killings. Now is the time, through Aktar Jahan's note, to listen to the voices of those who have had to resort to suicide. If we want to stop the next one.

Won't we listen?

The writer is Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka.



ILLUSTRATION: JASON DRAKEFORD

take this decision. I only wish that she had continued her struggle a little longer.

The problem is that when a woman becomes emotionally vulnerable, she hardly gets any support from her friends, her family, least of all, her society. Aktar Jahan spoke only to a few close friends regarding her situation, of which we know now. But confiding in

'foolishness': why did she do such a thing, and why had she even stayed in such an unhappy marriage for so long in the first place, as described by Anthropology professor of Jagannath University, Shaolee Mahbub (Aktar Jahan Ja Bolechhilen, Women Chapter, September 10, 2016) and Rifat Fatima (Moharaja Tomare Selam, Women Chapter, September 12, 2016). But then,

Many women in our country are forced to stay in abusive relationships just for the children's sake. They suffer even more after divorce over the custody issue. Women activists have been demanding a mother's right to have custody of her child for a long time but little has changed.

QUOTABLE Quote

SYED SHAMSUL HUQ
Words come to me. They come to me in the form of a poem, a story, a play or a novel. I want to share it with all. If I don't, I feel ill. If you like it, keep it in your heart. If you don't, forgive me. But I will still go on.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Boarded
6 Map ratio
11 Full of energy
12 Poison
13 Sire
14 Improve, in a way
15 Puzzle
17 Pickle purchase
19 Skip, as TV ads
20 Keg need
23 Early hominids
25 Old Italian currency
26 World War II fighter pilot
28 Peat or propane
29 Hidden
30 Snaky shape
31 Finish first
32 Bright beam
33 "Under Siege" star
35 Not napping
38 "Three Sisters" sister
41 Sturdy
42 Showy display
43 Run-down
44 Poem feature

DOWN
1 Yak it up
2 Bulling cheer
3 Yellowish gems
4 Roasting spot
5 Web participant
6 Philatelist's find
7 Deep sleep
8 Lumbermen's tool
9 NBA's Jeremy
10 Finale
16 Nerve centers
17 Writer Rona
18 Top grade
20 Orange-and-black flower
21 Concert venue
22 Bash
24 Wire measure
25 Set afire
27 Moroccan port
31 Like untended gardens
33 Lose traction
34 St. Louis sight
35 Silly goose
36 Misery
37 Brewpub setting
39 "Platoon" setting
40 Chowd down

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

YOU THINK YOU'RE A HOTSHOT, DON'T YOU? WELL, YOU'RE NOT!

I HATE IT WHEN GUYS INSULT YOU WITHOUT SAYING A SINGLE WORD

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

PLEASE, UP, PLEASE, I HAVE THREE THINGS TO SAY.

ONE, I WANT MORE ATTENTION. TWO, I DIDN'T REALLY LIKE WHAT WE HAD FOR DINNER TONIGHT. AND THREE, BOYS ARE GROSS.

I WILL NOW OPEN THE FLOOR FOR QUESTIONS.

CAN I HAVE HER DESSERT FOR THE REST OF THE WEEK?

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

J	A	N	O	I	E	C	H	A	P
A	N	O	D	E	T	E	A	S	E
C	A	M	E	L	E	L	I	T	E
O	D	E	S	H	A	L	T	E	R
B	I	D	S	S	U	B	I	R	S
S	E	A	R	C	H	E	D		
T	Y	R	A	R	O	S	Y		
F	O	X	T	R	Y	E	A	R	
O	M	E	L	E	T	F	A	R	E
R	A	D	A	R	W	I	R	E	S
T	H	I	N	S	O	V	E	N	S
H	A	N	D	N	E	R	D	Y	