

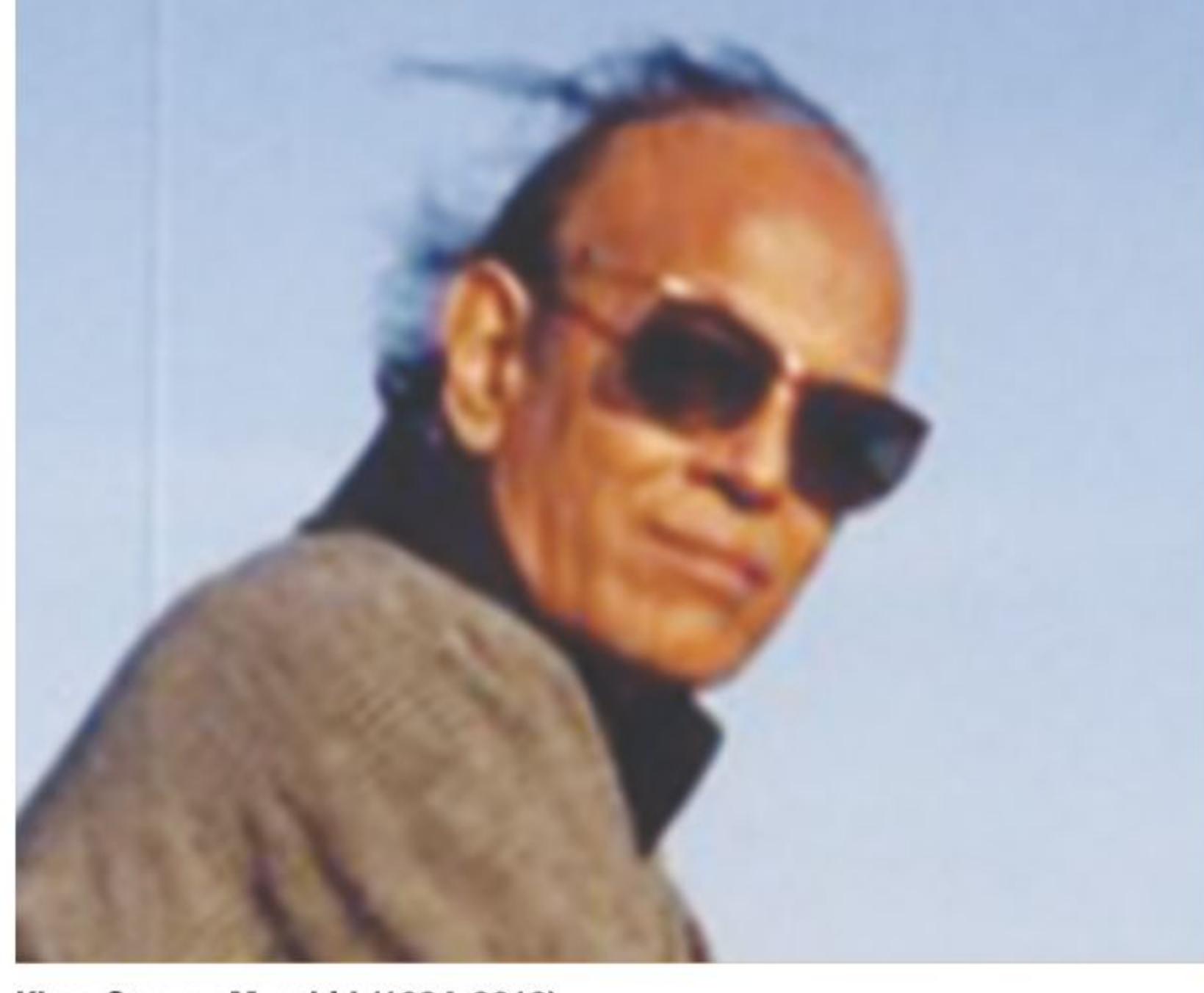
Values that will endure

TAZEEN M MURSHID

It makes perfect sense why ancestor worship flourished in ancient societies. It also stands to reason that upholders of dominant faiths have tried to keep this trend in check by limiting periods of mourning and remembrance and discouraging the practice of offering libation at the shrines of saints, Sufis and *pirs*. Those who have left us inhabit other spaces of which we know nothing. Only occasionally we make connections through dreams, visions and the intricate tricks of memory and remembering. In exploring these relationships, we try to make sense of the lives they lived, the choices they made, the impact they had on others and learn from these. We find inspiration and meaning and above all guidance.

My parents, so far and yet so near - I look for them around me, in their friends, in relatives and in me. We all carry bits of them with us. And I try to reconstruct an ideology, a way of life, a way of thinking, a way of being. The objects that would help such reconstruction are not easily accessible or available anymore. But I would like to tell their story around some of the artefacts that were around them. Each of these brings out certain aspects of their character, their response to ideas. One such object is the 'Venus Bust'.

It was in the summer of 1964 that my elder brother, Firdous, and I accompanied our father, Sarwar, back to Dhaka after a two-year stay in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the USA. On our way, we stopped in London and Athens. It was in Athens that he bought the white marble bust of the goddess Venus. This was a symbol of perfection and beauty. He hand-carried it all the way home and gave it pride of place in our living room. My *mejho khala*, Nadira, was shocked: 'Dress it up quickly!' she ordered. But that was not to be. No one else objected, neither my



Khan Sarwar Murshid (1924-2012)

paternal grandfather, Wakil Ali Ahmed Khan, nor my maternal grandmother, Bibi Khatimunnissa.

Having been permitted to jump a class or two in the US, I had just completed grade 7 and my brother, grade 9. Abba had been on a Rockefeller Fellowship at Harvard from 1961. We joined him a year later, amidst great excitement about going to a foreign country for the first time in our young lives!

I remember how carefully we had to plan what to take, because of the weight limit. We each had a British Airways in-flight carry-on bag that made us feel very important. September was not yet too cold. So, winter clothes would be bought on arrival. Yet, our mother worried that we might be cold on the way! The girls wore pretty *nagra* shoes that drew a lot of attention in Rome, and cream-coloured dresses that our mother had hand-made. She used to sew our clothes in those days. Legend has it that she made the Eid clothes for her children, nephews and nieces,

and once she started sewing, she would not stop until she had finished. And all the while her mother-in-law would keep her nourished by sending her food to her sewing table! Dressing us for school in the new country was carefully budgeted. Clothes were tastefully selected, replete with winter coats, mufflers, hats and shoes, so that we always looked smart and did not appear to want for anything.

Settling down in Cambridge, Mass. was fun for the children. School was playful. No homework. We had study periods in school for quiet self-study, and plenty of extramural activities. Initially, we all enrolled in our neighbourhood school called Henry Wadsworth Longfellow School. Within days, I was bored, and refused to go to school. I would finish my tasks within a few minutes, and then found it hard to sit still for the rest of the period. It must have been similar for Firdous, for Abba soon found Buckingham School for me and Brown and Nicholls for my brother.



Noor Jahan Murshid (1924-2003)

For our mother, Noor, it must have been challenging. Cooking and cleaning for a family of six, children always hungry, and the demands of her own studies for a Masters in Politics at Boston University, while working at Harvard University library after hours to augment the family income. But she never complained. In fact, she embraced the opportunity to teach herself to type so that she could submit her essays in type. Several of her essays were later published in the journal *New Values*, of which Sarwar was the erudite editor.

By the time the two academic years were over, we were no longer homesick. We all had strong American accents and good American friends and felt ourselves American pledging our loyalty to the US flag. We joined in all the activities in school including ballroom dancing, art, swimming, singing Christmas carols, etc., so that we could be a part of the class. We were thus never treated as different, and nor did we feel different.

Dhaka society was quite conservative in those days. Sending your children to co-ed dancing classes was not a light decision. Our parents had to negotiate these choices with each other in the best interest of their children in a foreign country where the norms were different. Noor managed to convince Sarwar that the children should enjoy all the educational facets on offer, and participate fully alongside all the other children in class, otherwise they should send the children back to Dhaka!

Concern with our education had been a key driving force for our parents. We were introduced to American music: Joan Baez, Burl Ives, and Kingston Trio. What we watched on TV was steered carefully. We watched the Shakespeare series 'Age of Kings' as a family activity, and looked forward to it with great enthusiasm. The series told the stories of British kings through the tales of Shakespeare.

Nevertheless, Abba was worried that we would lose our language and culture. Therefore, he obtained books

in Bangla up to grade 10 and we had to study Bangla with him every day after school. As a result, we remembered how to read and write in Bangla. It was a bit easier for the older two than for the younger two. Despite this, upon return to Dhaka, it was quite a struggle to keep up our grades in Bangla. An excellent tutor was thus hired to assist us with Bangla and mathematics. Notably, the levels of math in our prestigious Cambridge schools were not the same as in Dhaka.

Though encouraged to stay on in the US by his peers, Sarwar along with Noor decided to return to Dhaka. Warnings of approaching doomsday in the form of a possible break-up of Pakistan, sounded by Henry Kissinger, a senior Fellow at Harvard University, did not deter them. News had come through that Field Marshal Muhammad Ayub Khan had stopped the arrest and detention of political figures in East Bengal, and that women were not his targets. Our mother, who had been a minister in the United Front government on an Awami League ticket in 1954, could thus safely return home. And so, they did go back to the lands of their parents, aspiring for their children to grow up as proud, well-bred Bengalis, attuned to their culture and heritage, with a silent expectation that one day they would in turn contribute to the betterment of their country of birth.

The values they cherished, the appreciation of order, truth, beauty, empathy, embracing difference, nobility in spirit, and kindness in manners; to dream of just and beautiful but orderly societies; to desire a culturally rich and plural Bangladesh where honesty and integrity are its cornerstones - were no mere wishful thinking, but their lived experience. These values will hopefully endure now and through the next generations in the years to come.

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Why child domestic workers are prime victims



TAQBIR HUDA

THE photo of a battered young maid with black eyes swollen to the extreme shook the conscience of those who saw it circulating on social media the past week ("Tortured domestic help moved to Dhaka CMH", *The Daily Star*, July 4, 2017). The child was identified as 11-year-old Sabina Akhter from Tangail district, who was working as a maid in an army officer's house for the last six months in the capital's Mirpur DOHS area. Sabina was taken to the police station after being treated at One Stop Crisis Centre, when it was disclosed that the officer's wife, Ayesha Latif, used to habitually beat her up. Things took a turn for the worse on the morning of June 30 as Ayesha resorted to inflict torture on the little girl with hot kitchen utensils causing severe burns and bruises to her face, wrists, chest and back. Perhaps even more shocking than the brutality of Sabina's ordeal was the triviality of the supposed wrong she was being punished for: failure to fry an egg. She fled with the help of other locals who then took her to the hospital.

Although the gory details of Sabina's torment are indeed nerve-wracking, the torture of domestic help (specifically minor girls) is too frequent an occurrence in Bangladesh for the incident to warrant surprise. According to 2006 baseline survey by the ILO, there are about 420,000 child domestic workers in Bangladesh whose 'employment' usually borders on indentured servitude. Given that the survey was conducted over a decade ago, today's numbers may well be much higher. The vast majority of child domestic workers are



According to 2006 baseline survey by the ILO, there are about 420,000 child domestic workers in Bangladesh whose 'employment' usually borders on indentured servitude. | PHOTO: STAR

minor girls, aged six to seventeen, who are directly sent from their villages to urban areas—completely alien to them—by poverty-stricken parents who perhaps leap at the opportunity of turning an economic burden to a source of income. Their vulnerability only emboldens employers who engage in sadistic acts.

According to a study conducted by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), in the period between 2008 to 2011 there were 2,709 reported incidents involving violence against domestic workers, 729 of which led to the death of the

child domestic worker ("End Domestic Child Labour", *The Daily Star*, December 25, 2014). Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF) found that the severity of torture ranged from inhuman working hours with no rest to constant beatings (such as hitting the head against the wall, branding lit cigarettes and hot metal objects against raw skin, etc), while some were even raped and as a result committed suicide ("A Desk Review on Child Labour in Domestic Work in Bangladesh", Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, December 2013). It is important to note that abuse need

not be physical in order to amount to torture. Torture can also be of an economic or mental nature (from non-payment of wages to incessant verbal abuse and infliction of trauma) and therefore needs to be recognised and condemned all the same.

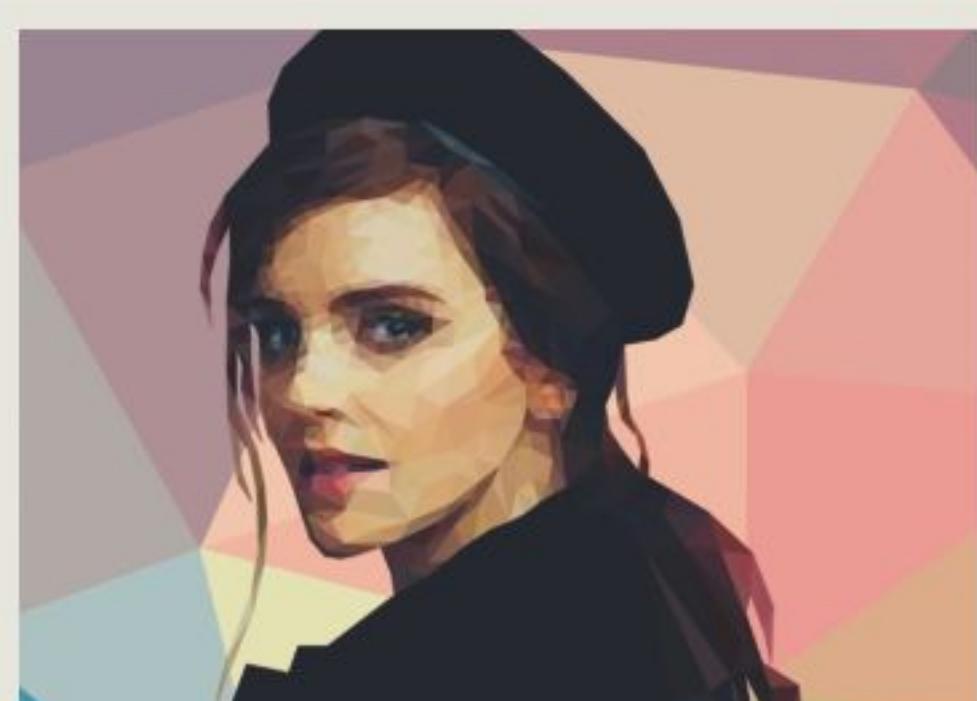
We are quick to lambast cruelty against humanity in all other parts of the world while turning a blind eye to the atrocities against domestic workers present in our own communities. Sabina's case itself highly resembles another similarly horrific torture incident from last year. Moni Begum, a school

teacher, had severely tortured her nine-year-old maid by burning the poor child all over her body and scalp with a scorching hot metal spatula, simply because she asked for a leave to go visit her parents ("9-year-old brutally tortured", *The Daily Star*, September 16, 2016). It is high time we realised that torture of domestic help is but an extreme manifestation of our society's wider class problem, which I believe, is rooted in the landowning class's false yet deeply entrenched sense of superiority over the working class people. Just like the trans-Atlantic slave trade dehumanised black people on the basis of race, we dehumanise domestic workers on the basis of their socioeconomic standing. We must also be conscious of the everyday classist microaggressions that are rooted in the same strand of dehumanisation and arguably pave the way for such extreme barbarities. This should be part and parcel of our fight against it.

The threshold of humane treatment is not simply met by abstaining from torturing the help. Our condemnation of the plight faced by domestic workers would be somewhat hypocritical if it is not also followed by a little bit of introspection. So while we hurl (much deserved) insults at the likes of Ayesha and Moni, let us also ask ourselves: how humanely are domestic workers, particularly child workers, treated under our own roof? And while we hope that justice is served to Sabina and her torturer, let us seriously take a moment to ponder: how many more child workers are suffering abuse and torture in utter silence, behind the closed mahogany doors of 'civilised' homes?

Taqbir Huda is currently working as a Research Officer at Bangladesh Institute of Law International Affairs (BILIA) and volunteers at Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR- Manabdhikar).

QUOTABLE Quote



EMMA WATSON

British actress, model and activist

Call me a 'diva', call me a 'feminazi', call me 'difficult', call me a 'First World feminist', call me whatever you want, it's not going to stop me from trying to do the right thing and make sure that the right thing happens.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Succeed
- 35 Blase
- 38 Of the kidneys
- 41 Banish
- 42 Put up
- 43 Scout shelters
- 44 Gave medicine to
- 15 Relishes
- 17 Plopped down
- 19 Mamie's man
- 20 Diet no-no
- 23 Reunion group
- 25 Employ
- 26 Like beech-wood
- 28 Smooth
- 29 Go to
- 30 In medias --
- 31 Play part
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