



POETRY

I Can Prove Mathematically

AZFAR HUSSEIN

I swear by my mother's milk: I swear in the name of metals and minerals, in the name of coffee and coco, in the name of land and labor, that an emergency-poem like this one needs ample prose and even crude mathematical proofs.

I can prove mathematically that there's a difference between 90 billion dollars and 25 cents—between one Bill Gates and 50 million Latin Americans.

I can prove mathematically that x is not y and that the moon in the sky is precisely the moon in the sky,

I can prove mathematically that the President of the World and the Word exists, that his foreign policy is screwing the universe two times over, that racism is eating ethnic food and getting fat, and that terrorism is a many-headed monster out again and again.

I can prove mathematically that capitalism dissolves boundaries between fiction and finance, between mythology and murder, and between bodies and commodities.

I can prove mathematically that there's a difference between dancing and dying, between bullshit and cow-dung, between eating and starving, and between killing and being killed.

I can prove mathematically that history is a massive wound; that history is stubborn; that it can scream at the top of its voice with facts bleeding across all the dense silences of the world.

I can prove mathematically, I can prove mathematically, I can prove mathematically that all mothers who lost their children and all children who lost their mothers from South Asia to South America—across the Middle East—are praying and crying and crying and praying for peace and justice in the fold of the cloud, in the skin of the tree, in the syntax of the sand, in the silence of the stone, and in the hollow of the sky. And the whole world becomes one cry!

I can prove mathematically that mathematics is more tenacious than myths and metaphors.

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Three Poems

MASUD MAHMOOD



I
In the silence of the heart
Entered the assassin
And murdered the flower
That bloomed unseen.
He tore it petal by petal
And his hand slowly ran
with cool liquid fragrance.
Flowers die like lovers
Pining and desiring,
Unrequited and burning,
Tombs of lingering sweetness.

II
Silent twilight under the skull.
Crepuscular crickets chirp
And dusk-singing cicadas drone,
Myriad rasping knives slice,
Slicing up a big nut bone-white.
The ceaseless creatures hum
Like monks in fierce meditation.
Lucent neurons fly off the brain
Like ricocheting electrons,
Flustering thoughts darkly stalk
As shades would dim corridors,
Half-formed, glimmering, melting,
Nascent, evanescent
Under the skull in silent, shrill twilight.

III
Waiting keeps a different time.
Its clock isn't made in town
Nor has the maker an address
But he'd sure deliver an empty dial face
When you sorely seek to fill in
The boundless space
You brood on and on endlessly
Till you wake up to your fond illusion.
Waiting keeps a different time
On weird phantom calibration:
Its seconds ride the hour hand
Its hours travel a desolate land
And its maker is a juggler of sand
And the hourglass a miracle in his hand
where the grains trickle without an end.



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MUSINGS

A View from the Ladies Common Room, Dacca University

GHAZALA SCHEIK AKBAR

Remembrance of things past...

DU. How those letters conjure up a sense of awe and bittersweet memory. Always in the vanguard of political, progressive movements... Language (1952), Constitution (1962), Democracy (1968/69) and Independence (1971)... but distinguished too, for its intellectual environment and academic excellence. Dacca University's endless graffiti marked corridors were a daunting place for me, a teenager and a female, in the politically momentous years of the late 1960s.

My cousin Rafat Deen (English 1963) and my elder sister Shama (English 1966) had both trail-blazed successfully, convincing my recently-widowed Mother that I was mature enough to enter its hallowed ground and apply for a place in the Honours programme of the Political Science Department in the latter half of '67. My Registration cost all of Rs 6! Not a bad bargain, when you consider that on the faculty, amongst others, were luminaries, Professor Mozaffar Ahmed Chowdhury (MAC), Dr. Rashiduzzaman and the legendary, 'Razzaque Sir.'

Emerging from the mild, protected environs of the all-girls Holy Cross College, it was a great leap forward into the unknown and the harsh realities of a wider world, way beyond my comfort zone. For the first time one came across people from varied backgrounds, hailing from distant villages and remote towns in faraway districts. Most importantly at DU, there was no forced segregation. Both sexes were treated as equals... as co-students, classmates and comrades.

This was not Aligarh University where a 'Purdah' in the classroom separated the sexes or Karachi University (which I later attended) where Fascist Proctors armed with yardsticks roamed the grounds measuring and enforcing the ridiculous rule that there must be a three-foot distance if girls and boys had the temerity to address each other!

At DU we did not receive, nor did we expect any preferential treatment either from the Administration or our Professors. The ratio of males to females was around three to one but apart from a few 'reserved' seats in the first few rows of lecture rooms all students were deemed democratically and biologically equal.

There was however one exception, where female autonomy and independence was guaranteed: the Ladies Common Room. Located on the ground floor of the Arts Faculty building, it was our special quarter, our *Zenana*. The Men had their Modhu's canteen and jointly we could fraternise at the TSC (Teacher Student Centre) but the ladies common room was our personal space.

If gentleman callers wanted to see us, they must first send a note inside, and then the ladies would deign to emerge from behind the curtain. No man could enter its portals. Not even the Dean, Vice Chancellor or the Governor himself... except the teenage boy from the canteen.



THE ARTS FACULTY BUILDING.

First Year Honours Students of the English Department in convocation gowns walk in procession towards Shahbagh Hotel for an 'Orientation Lunch.' Apparently this was an Oxford University rite which the Head of the Department saw fit to emulate at DU, 'Oxford of the East.' Students paid Rs 10 per head for the privilege. In contrast the University registration fee was only Rupees 6!

Deferentially the blushing lad would enter and with lowered gaze, take our orders for *Singhara*, *Aloor Chop*, *Roshogollah*, and *Cha*.

Just two wide rooms and a central pathway buzzed with constant chatter and bonhomie. Old acquaintances were renewed and new friendships formed that still survive. It was a place where we could literally let down our hair, refresh, play table-tennis, read newspapers or take forty winks on the armchairs; a place of interaction where we exchanged ideas, gossip, confirmed or denied rumours. Impromptu plans were made for the cinema, restaurants or shopping at the new market.

It was a melting pot -- where rural met urban, village met city, Hindu met Muslim, old Dacca met new Dacca, English medium met Bangla medium, sari met shalwar-kameez, first year met final year, economics met psychology, and art met science. Frequently we received visitors... from the neighbouring Arts College, Medical College and Engineering University.

Sometimes and much to our merriment, a brave middle-aged aunty might show up surreptitiously checking out a prospective bride for her eligible son!

This is where campus love stories began or came to a bitter end; where we celebrated an impending nuptial or wept in horror at the shocking suicide of a fellow student. This is where we escaped when 'Rag Day' colour festivities became too riotous, or hid when the fearsome twosome 'Khoka' went walkabout with his pet snake and knife-wielding assistant 'Passpartout' (aptly nicknamed as he had not passed beyond the 'part two' of any educational institution)! Suffice to say, they were not fellow students but professional goons sent by the Government to terrorise the student body. But even Khoka, snake and sidekick did not dare enter the Ladies' Common Room.

Politics --- local, national and international was a recurring theme. Frequently some aspiring student leader would stand on the table tennis

table to deliver a tirade on the burning questions of the day. We joined heartily in the slogan-mongering. 'Down with this... Zindabad that!' Sometimes we joined a procession in the corridors demanding a hated one's *mangsho* and *roktu*!

At DU one's political education began early. In the very first week, along with deciphering the time tables, we also had to figure out our political affiliations. Were we Pro- Peking (EPSU, Menon group) or Pro-Moscow (EPSU, Motia group)? Were we Nationalists (Chatro league led by Tofail Ahmed)? Or horror upon horror, supporters of the Government Goon Party, the NSF!

This was the era of the Vietnam War, Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, Paris student uprising and the Sino-Soviet split. Revolution was on the doorstep. Even the fiery Tariq Ali, came all the way from London to address us under the *Bot Tola*... the Banyan tree. Some lucky students journeyed to Santosh, Tangail to participate in the great gathering of Leftists. There was hope, idealism and a feeling that the 'times they - are - a changing,' like in the Bob Dylan song.

Surprising as it may sound, in the midst of these distractions we did manage to attend classes, tutorials, visit libraries and receive an education. But as later events testify, this was the calm before the storm. Earth-shattering, epoch-making times were just round the corner. Not just the November 1970 cyclone but a major political hurricane was brewing in the country. Twice the authorities closed the university *Sine Die* with no date for resumption. Hostels were emptied, students went home. It was a portent for the darker days that lay ahead when DU would become the eye of the storm.

More than forty-five plus years have passed but I remember vividly a conversation with a fellow student in the common room. We shared a Subsidiary class and a common surname. It was December, 1970 and a general election had been decisively won. 'So when is your father going to Islamabad?' I inquired. She replied: 'I don't know.' And then with a characteristic twinkle in her light eyes: 'I think Islamabad will be coming here.' We both laughed. Little did we realise then the import of her remark.

In the coming months, DU and Ruqayyah Hall would suffer a bloody onslaught but they survived... and so too, the Ladies Common Room. Sadly, I was not there when it re-opened -- its denizens - battered, bruised but victorious regrouped to mourn their fallen comrades and teachers. As they recounted tearful experiences, I am told, a tragicomic note was interjected by our cinema - loving friend from Comilla. Despite suffering a terrible personal loss, she lamented loudly: 'Hai re Hai! Pakistan shesh!! Aar aamra Mohammad Ali - Zeba chobi dekhtey paarbo na. Eeshh!'

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