

Tribute to Raina Abu Zafar

I met Mooena Moinuddin, popularly known as Raina Abu Zafar in 2003, on the Malaz campus of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh. We weren't friends on the first day, but as colleagues, we did bump into each other often. It wasn't until we started to share the same office that we became close. We had some wonderful talks, sometimes even upsetting one another! She was an unusual person. I found in her, a woman with a rare zest for life, outgoing, dignified, but still very childlike. Daughter of a Kashmiri Nawab and a Bengali Brahmin lady who converted to Islam, she revelled in telling her parent's love story. I could always feel the pride that she took when she told me that her grandmother and Rabindranath Tagore's mom were sisters! And she would chuckle about how she, while as a student of the American field service exchange programme, shook hands with John F. Kennedy, and did not wash her hand for two straight days! With both parents highly placed and educated in their times, she took pride in her sophisticated roots.

We spent a decade together in that office, and she would often give me a ride back home. Often times, we would hum to each other. Slowly, as time passed, she opened her heart to me, and they say when people open their hearts to others, they become vulnerable. I understood how she often camouflaged her pain with a warm smile. I grasped the truth, of how a good human being gets troubled. I came to realise that she belonged to a rare breed of people who are so harmless, they could pose a danger to themselves.

She was friends with some of Saudi Arabia's elites; aristocrats and diplomats, and all her relationships with these dignitaries have always been service oriented. She was actively involved in the Nahda Philanthropic Society. She wrote regularly for The Saudi



Gazette, and sometimes for Arab News too. She taught in many institutions, but her longest stint was at Imam University. Her students loved her, and she loved them back. She taught, and more importantly, impressed thousands of students.

In 2012, she lost her husband, Abu Zafar, well-known for his contributions to the Toast Masters and Mushairas et al. It's really rare that you get to see a wife of such unwavering loyalty and painstakingly caring calibre. May Allah accept all the efforts she took to get her ailing husband back to health. She left the kingdom in 2013, never to return to Saudi Arabia.

In spite of all the tumult in her life, she always radiated a sweet energy. Back home, she taught until just a month before her death. I marvel at her resilient spirit that sliced through the truth of her growing cancer. Whenever I spoke to her, she spoke with the same feisty spirit, and had the same goodwill for others. She was incredibly forgiving when it came to my outspokenness.

My last talk with her was on 27 August.

I could sense that she had started to feel death creeping up on her, but she was trying to shake the fear away. Every now and then, she would pop up with a "what if" question. I knew that was her protectiveness for her children. I told her to "stand back" and let things play out. Have faith in Divine timings and His orchestration.

She was suddenly struck with the nostalgia of her times in Riyadh; her deep connection with the place, and her warm feelings for her students and colleagues made me hum a song to her —

Rishta dil say dil ka aitbaar ka, Zinda hai hami say naam pyaar ka

Ki markay bhi kisi ko yaad aayengay, Kisi kay aansuoa may muskurayengay

Kahay ga phool har kali say baar baar,

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Jeena isi ka naam hai

I thought I could hear her heart pounding whilst I was humming. I could almost see some sort of a smile that is close

to tears — the smiling tears she would have when I would sing "bekas pay Karam kijiye Sarkaar e Madina," when both of us were ever in troubled waters. Indeed, our lives are not in our control, we have to be in control of ourselves. She had burnt herself out, and it was time for a time out.

I had this sudden urge to call her up at 1AM on 19th September. I knew she was always awake and answered my calls! But this time, she did not answer! She breathed her last on Friday, 20 September, 2019, and was laid to rest in their family graveyard in Bangladesh. After life's restless moments, she now sleeps peacefully in her father's grave.

In spite of the geographic separation, the student community has experienced a great loss. She will be remembered by everyone for her services to the people of this world.

As far as I am concerned, my over-a-decade long bond with her will only strengthen with our memories, happy, delightful conversations, good will, and friendly expressions. Of course, the hiccups too! I guess, even when a person passes away, they continue to live inside our memories.

Tanhaiyo may aksar royangay yaad karkay, Wo waqt jo kay humnay ek saath hai guzaara

Guzra hua zamana Aata nahi dubara, Hafiz Khuda Tumhara

I wish I could give her a big hug and make her feel loved and wanted.

Rest in peace, Raina.

Hafiz Khuda Tumhara...

By Dr Humera Sultana

Photo: Courtesy

The writer teaches English at Princess Nourah bint Abdul Rahman University for Women, Riyadh. She is the author of 'Musings and Whispers of a Soul'. This tribute has also been published in the Albilad English Daily.



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