


Bangladesh at the South Asian Literary Conference, October 2021

DAILY STAR LITERATURE DESK



Sahitya Akademi
and
Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL)

cordially invite you to our

South Asian Online Literary Conference

on 6 - 9 October, 2021

The programme is according to the Indian Standard Time (IST)
Please adjust your time accordingly

PROGRAMME	
Wednesday, October 6, 2021	
Inaugural Session: 10.00 am - 12.30 pm	
Welcome Address	: K. Sreenivasarao Secretary, Sahitya Akademi
Presidential Address	: Ajeet Cour President, FOSWAL
Chief Guest	: Chandrashekar Kambur President, Sahitya Akademi
Guests of Honour	: Mohammed Nurul Huda, Bangladesh Kunzang Choden, Bhutan Akhtarul Wasey, India Najib Manalal, Afghanistan Keshab Sigdel, Nepal Kanchana Priyakantha, Sri Lanka Ibrahim Waheed, Maldives
Concluding Remarks	: Madhav Kaushik Vice President, Sahitya Akademi

The SAARC Literary Festival dates back to 1987, a year after the formation of SAARC. Ajeet Caur, a writer and recipient of the Padma Shri Award, first organized the festival on behalf of the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL). In her attempt to bring the writers of the SAARC countries, she has been a pivotal figure through the years to make the SAARC cultural bonding strong as ever. A 4-day long programme titled, "South Asian Online Literary Conference" took place this year in March where poets and writers from all SAARC countries read from their works and discussed on relevant topics. Then again, October 6-9, 2021, a second Literary Conference was held in collaboration with the Sahitya Akademi.

The programme spanned through 4 days. The inaugural session was held on the first day and welcome address made by K. Sreenivasarao, the Secretary of Sahitya Akademi. Ajeet Cour was kind enough to chair and attend different sessions of the program through all four days. All the sessions of the conference went live on

youtube.

This October, like previous years, many writers and academics from Bangladesh participated in the programme. A highlight of the programme was a panel on the *Unfinished Memoir* by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It was the second session of the very first day. The panelists of this session were Mofidul Hoque, Prof. Fakrul Alam and Kamal Chowdhury. Their discussion focused on the difficulties involving the *Memoir* that got lost and then resurfaced and finally were published and translated as well.

Among other sessions of interest and significance for Bangladeshi audience was one on fiction where Selina Hossain and Jharna Rahman read out from their selected fiction pieces.

Kaiser Haq chaired a poetry session and read out from his own work.

Syed Manzoorul Islam in an interview with Fayeza Hasanat spoke of his art of story-writing. He emphasized the oral tradition and magic realism that upholds local traditions like bauliana and Sufism. When asked about the Liberation War of 1971 as

2021 celebrates the golden jubilee of the birth of Bangladesh, he spoke of the complications involving the War, the difficulties and the good things he experienced. He emphasized the positive aspects of life and why it is important to remember 1971 and why stories are important. Professor Islam also praised the FOSWAL efforts of connecting the SAARC countries.

Another important segment was Niaz Zaman's interview with Jackie Kabir. She spoke of her interest in translation with a special focus on Kazi Nazrul Islam. She also spoke of other translators who have been working and publishing through the last decades. She also addressed an important question of copyright problems with translations.

Among the other presenters from Bangladesh, there were Faruq Sumon, poet Ashraf Jewel, Bimal Guha, Sanjeeda Hossain, Rifat Munim and Sohana Manzoor.

The four-day program was amazing, especially as it was held online and yet was able to bring together writers from across the SAARC countries.



Jibanananda Das "Kartik Bhore: 1340"

An October Dawn

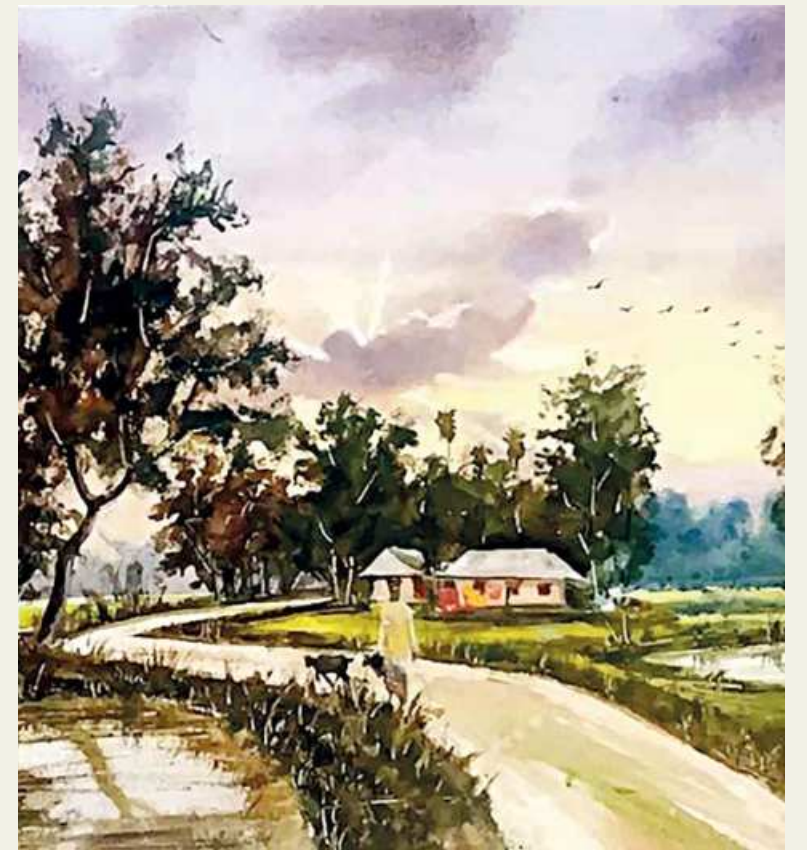
TRANSLATED BY ASIF CHOWDHURY

On that October dawn
The dew that descended
on my eyes, my face, my hair,
did so as the *Shaliks* intended.

Three *Shaliks* feeling the emblica tree
in the midst of a soaked October's sunlight
like three women whom I knew with my own heart;
With the sun? Or is it the sun's sandals

they put on to visit this earth
and to flee from it.
Countless *Shaliks* I have seen in this life of mine
yet I long for those three.

Asif Chowdhury is an occasional writer, based in London.



Motherhood and Sylvia Plath's *Three Women*

SOHANA MANZOOR

While students of literature are most often advised not to ponder over the personal lives of authors, it is almost impossible to do that in the case of Sylvia Plath. How does one separate Plath the poet from Sylvia the woman who suffered from severe depression that seeped into her writing and produced astounding poetry? She died almost seventy years ago, but as a confessional and feminist poet, Plath's position has only grown stronger over the years.

This article looks into Sylvia Plath's verse drama *Three Women*, written a year before her death in 1963. Inspired by Ingmar Bergman's film *Brink of Life*, *Three Women* portrays a bleak world where three women share similar experiences of pain of childbirth in a maternity ward. Their names are not given and only one of them, the first voice, is able to take her baby home. The second, a working woman and wife, loses a cherished child, while the last voice, a student, gives up her unwanted baby for adoption. Though failing to give rise to as much interest as Plath's collected poems *Ariel*, *Three Women* is very complex and intense, and these voices virtually are the forerunners of Plath's poetic personas in *Ariel*.

Most critics look at the piece as fragmentation of the poet's creative self. For example, Steven Axelrod in "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath" analyzes how even the first voice, the successful one is "frightened, powerless and marginalized," aligning herself with "historical victims":

I am breaking apart like a world. There is this blackness,
.... There is this blackness
.... The air is thick. It is thick with this working.

I am used. I am drummed into use.
The description of the suffering of childbirth is acute and following many other women writers before her, she also felt torn between her creative self and the traditional role of a mother and wife.

Plath's contemporary writer and critic Adrienne Rich explains in her well-known article, "When We Dead Awaken," how theirs was a time in which the middle-class women were absolutely taken in with the idea of "domestic perfection." In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich elaborates this idea showing how most Western women of the 1950s and 60s entertained the concept of motherhood influenced by family members and in-laws that being a mother is the only way a woman matures and becomes complete. Rich herself got married in early twenties and



had three children before thirty. Plath too, thought to have found perfect blissfulness in her marriage with Ted Hughes in 1956. Afterwards, even though she was devastated by her husband's infidelity, she continued to glorify motherhood.

When BBC first published the script of the radio play *Three Women* in 1968, the first voice was identified as the "wife" because of the successful birth of the child and the crooning voice of the mother, even though there is no presence of a father. This voice envisions

her son growing up to be a normal, ordinary person who would return her love and marry whoever he wishes. This character actually poses the question if a mother may not raise her children on her own. Her articulations on her son's birth reveal a mother's unquestionable love and responsibility for her child:

What did my fingers do before they held him?

What did my heart do, with its love?
During her last days, Plath also wrote to

her friends about her deep motherly affection for her beautiful children while she worked feverishly and vigorously on her last poems.

The second voice, often considered the strongest, is later developed in many of her later poems in *Ariel*. It was initially identified as the "secretary" and the "working woman" though she is the only one who seems to have a husband to go back to after the miscarriage. But there is no warmth in the relationship between this wife and her husband. He was not even there when she lost the baby. (This could be the poet herself as she also lost a child during the early days of her marriage). However, the voice is more articulate in giving vent to her frustration:

It is these men I mind:
They are so jealous of anything that is not flat!
They are jealous gods

That would have the whole world flat because they are.

In Plath's poetry, God (a symbol of patriarchy) and men conspire together to make women suffer for their capacity of child-bearing. For her, giving birth to children and being able to write, are both processes of creativity. Therefore, deterring women from becoming mothers, men and patriarchal social system pose a barrier to women's creativity. Even the first voice, the happy and successful voice, has complaints against the hostile atmosphere of the maternity ward. But whereas the disturbing world of the first woman is transformed into a peaceful garden after the birth of her son, the second woman becomes a peripheral being, looking on the hustle and bustle of the world from a distance, her voice bitter, her life empty. The anger and frustration towards the male dominion expressed through this voice becomes indomitable in Plath's later poem, "Lady Lazarus," where the speaker wants to "eat men up like air."

The third voice was initially identified as "the girl," and her position seems to be the saddest of them all. However, critics have given her less attention than the other two, probably considering her emotions as a mother less important, since she abandons her baby daughter. But, a careful reader will notice that she does not give up her daughter happily. Her emotions are frozen because she cannot comprehend the chain of events surrounding her:

She is a small island, asleep and peaceful,
And I am a white ship hooting: Goodbye, goodbye.

The day is blazing....
I am a wound walking out of hospital....

I leave my health behind. I leave someone
Who would adhere to me.

She returns to her everyday student life. She observes lovers, wants to feel young once more while her heart whispers, "What is it I miss? Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?" She is bitter against society, the male doctors in the ward, and resentful of the awareness of her own new identity in a world where she has been forced to enter. Linda Fraser identifies her case not as "an isolated, personal event," rather producing "the political appropriation of the female body codified throughout Western history in seminal, mythic 'origin' narratives." (568) The difference between her and the first voice is a choice which makes the first voice utter confidently, "I am ready," whereas this girl cries bitterly, "I wasn't ready." She was not ready when she was raped, and she is not ready when she is to deliver her child.

Through these three women Sylvia Plath dramatizes women and motherhood, throwing light upon the complex psychodrama of the process of becoming a mother. They also illustrate how the relationship between a mother and her child can be ambiguous, and also how the entire surrounding, including the maternity ward tries to dominate over the mother-child relationship. Surely enough, though this piece was written more than fifty years ago, the voices of the three women can be identified in our world too.

In *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*, Linda Wagner-Martin records how Plath edited her husband's poetry, sent them to American journals, played the role of his secretary, and from a sideline watched him basking in the attention of the literary circle of London. Well-known poets and writers visiting the couple often did not even know that she wrote poetry. But in most social contexts that is still the role assigned to women. As wives, women are expected to compromise and sacrifice, as Plath also did initially. But in her later poems, she creates a new woman, in whom the critics identified a female power never displayed before by any other poet. Even though she could not sustain the power in her own life for long, Sylvia Plath's poetry later on came to be recognized as the voice of a woman who would move on with life under any adverse situation.

Sohana Manzoor is Associate Professor, Department of English & Humanities, ULAB. She is also the Literary Editor of The Daily Star.