



(L) Mary Frances Dunham and Daniel C. Dunham in their home “Hafiz Villa” on Siddheswari Road, Dhaka in 1960s. Photo: Collected (M) Mary Frances Dunham with family in 2018. Photo credit: Yannick Michaud. (R) Mary Frances Dunham with Ahmed Sofa and Rounaq Jahan in the 1990s. Photo: Collected.

# Mary Frances Dunham: In memoriam

**SALIMULLAH KHAN**

*The blood of the farmer is very sweet and everybody wants to taste it; Middle-men, traders, bureaucrats, everyone.*  
— Ahmed Sofa (Quoted in Dunham 1997: 262)

I Mary Frances Dunham (b. 1932) died on October 11, 2021 in New York. Her demise at 89, though hardly before her time, has come to me as a shock. It is only about two weeks since Katherine Dunham, her good daughter, so gracefully found a way to have some boxes of the Ahmed Sofa papers in Mary Frances’ custody, including her correspondence ever since 1996 with our great writer, delivered to the library of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh in Dhaka.

I owe it to the generosity of Alam Khorshed, my good friend, who put me in contact with Katherine early last year and who helped serialise an English version of Ahmed Sofa’s narrative *Tales of Flowers, Birds and Trees*, a new alike of Henry David Thoreau’s (1817-1862) old book, *Walden*. Truth be told, by then I had grown almost, if not quite, forgetful about the work I did, at Ahmed Sofa’s behest, with Mary Frances some twenty years ago.

As far as my memory goes, I met Mary Frances in New York in the spring of 1998. But I am not sure, for I don’t keep diaries and I have lost my memorabilia. I did not have the privilege to visit her at her Manhattan residence. It was her grace to consent to visit me in a modest apartment on Gleason Avenue in the Bronx, not a mean distance from her East Side home. Moreover, mine was a tent in one of the most rundown busteas of the great city.

Mary Frances surprised me one day by offering to drop by my home. She used to take her bicycle regularly on Saturdays, from 9 am to 1 pm, for about three consecutive months. She did me the greatest honour by sharing meals with me, made of steamed broccoli and lentil soup I boasted knowing how to prepare. Mary Frances always found it nice.

During light conversations, she would tell me of her taste for Greek food, Mediterranean music and, most delightfully, of her own Greek origins. She spoke little about her time in Dhaka in the 1960s, as she did about Ahmed Sofa. *Sofa Bhui*, as like myself, she too got used to calling him.

We worked together real hard for four long morning hours, on our translation, or perhaps I should say retranslation, of Ahmed Sofa’s exciting novella *Tale of Flowers, Birds and Trees*, as Mary Frances liked to name it. She also told me, by the by, that a Japanese translation of the book had already appeared with a foreword by Kenzaburo Oe, a Nobel laureate in Literature.

Mary Frances also inserted, as appendix, one “*jarigan* song” written by Ahmed Sofa in her eponymous book. Her tribute to a living Ahmed Sofa, rendered in 1997, is both a pioneer’s jab and a striking hook.

“Ahmed Sofa is a born *kabi* — a wise man, a poet, novelist, journalist, and naturally, a teacher,” she added. “He is well known in these roles as well as being a cordial host who,” noted Mary Frances, “can entertain listeners with gentle parables and provocative ideas for hours on end.”

I would like to quote a couplet (with Mary Frances’ version in English added) of Ahmed Sofa’s “*jarigan* song” here:

*Juge juge, kale kale, ei desheri chhele,  
Deshar lagi, lorai kori, pran diyechhe dhele.  
From generation to generation, time to time,  
we children of this country,  
Love our country, fight (for it), and give our*

*lives for it.*

(Quoted in Dunham 1997: 260)

What I owe to Ahmed Sofa is not all nameable. I can hardly describe it at any rate in this space. Introducing Mary Frances Dunham must be one of his most unforgettable gifts to me. Our introduction took place through letters Ahmed Sofa wrote to me and then by Mary Frances’ calls over the land phone. As I recall, back then I didn’t use a mobile phone.

One fine cold morning, I saw Mary Frances crawling with her bicycle to my fifth-floor apartment in a post-war relic sans elevator and we jumpstarted working on a rough print out which, as she told me, was Ahmed Sofa’s own doing and on which she put her occasional stamps here and there. When I was being handed out successive chapters I felt obliged to tell Mary Frances that the whole thing needed a thorough rehashing. She readily agreed.

II

What Mary Frances had been more intent on doing was to convert Ahmed Sofa’s almost-English into some fully American idioms. Understandably, a translation is, after all, a repetition with a difference. It sometimes transcends the original should anxiety take over. The imaginary reader or the gaze above determines.

An example from Mary Frances’s book *Jarigan* will perhaps illustrate my point. “It was by accident,” she wrote, “that I first came to know about *jarigan* songs. While I was living in Dhaka during the 1960s, the Bangladeshi poet Jasimuddin (1903-1976) was preparing a book on the topic. He had transcribed twenty full-length *jarigan* songs (a feat in itself) and written a ninety-page explanatory introduction.” (Dunham 1997: xv)

The signifier “songs” after *jarigan*, a redundancy in Bangladeshi almost-English, was a most suitable thing for her. She did make a hundred insertions like this, for example “*Salik* bird”, or “*Tulsi* tree” in *Tales of Flowers, Birds and Trees*.

Mary Frances Dunham, living in Dhaka of the 1960s, learned her Bangla pretty well. After all, she did work with the great poet Jasimuddin. But that was now a distant memory. It was natural that she now needed an upgrading of her acquisition. With her book *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh* already behind, she made good progress with her command over Bangla. I was comfortable drawing on her repertoire more often than not.

A selfless humanist, she used to do all the hard work of taking long hours of dictations, doing all the typesetting chores for the revised, revised, revised texts and bringing me the galley sheets fresh from a dot printer every Saturday morning. At 66, she was agile, almost stoic in her food and other habits. I was then around 40, no match for her indomitable will and energy.

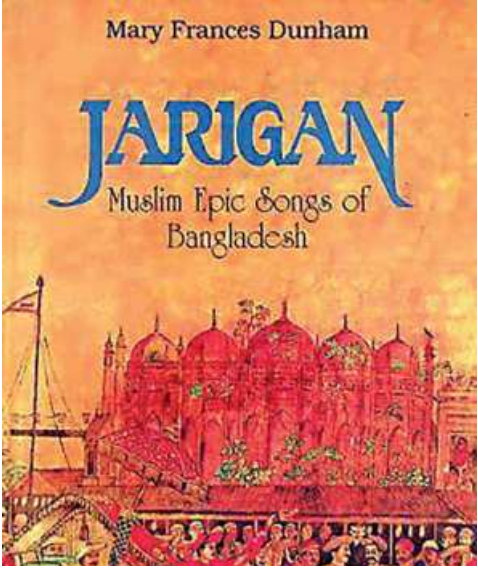
We corrected the proofs together again and again, and once again. The task seemed like an infinite series, a marathon of sorts. Adding further agony to anxiety, I was by then on my last legs in New York, with a teaching load of two college courses like that last straw on the camel’s back, on top of a long overdue dissertation load I had to jettison one lifetime’s last time on.

I could not set aside, unfortunately, more than those three months or so for the immensely pleasurable task. All the last-minute touches to our agreed upon text were eventually Mary Frances’ own contribution. I had to leave the project at that hour in the interest of completing my own assignment. She, an indefatigable correspondent, also kept

Ahmed Sofa well appraised of our progress with our worldwide text.

Later, on my return to Dhaka in mid-2000, I found multiple drafts on and around Ahmed Sofa’s small desk. Some of Mary Frances’ letters to Ahmed Sofa mentioned my collaboration for three months as “help with” the translation. I smiled.

I found it rather unbecoming of me to call that understatement by its proper name. To be honest, it was I who did the dictation job of the whole text – A to Z – completely anew from scratch because there was hardly a thing that could be saved from Ahmed Sofa’s primal almost-English provision. The hardest task of taking down and processing it all, however, fell squarely on Mary Frances. I wanted to give her all the credit. For it was by all means her labour of love that brought it to the shores, above all North American shores. Had her Bangla been a trifle better than it was, my labour could happily be described as “help”, pure and simple. Even now I feel a trifle constrained to put this story on record as part of an apologia for a lost world.



(L) Cover of Mary Frances Dunham’s book *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh*. (R) Mary Frances Dunham celebrating her birthday at home with her family in New York City in 2020. Photo credit: Katherine Dunham.

But truth must prevail, especially when I resolved to tell the tale.

III

Mary Frances Dunham hoped as she told Ahmed Sofa (and also me a couple of times) that she was in active communication with the Penguin India publishers for putting the book out in an English translation. A year or so later, as she would tell me, it didn’t work out for “technical reasons”; Penguin India would not be ready momentarily to bet on a book in such small bulk. It was too thin for their purpose. True.

In the meantime, I myself had to sing an auld lang syne to New York. Since 2000, I was again up for harder times and expectations dwindled to basics in a not-too-hospitable world. Dhaka became more foreign to me than New York, where I could find work for twelve years as an adjunct at the least, a word that sounds close to “junk”, though. I eddied between Dhaka, Stockholm and even to London, one time. Ahmed Sofa, who died the following year, kept sending echoes:

If this nation, brothers, gets appropriate education,

It can stand erect and hold its head high. The nation is rising, making the Himala-

yas tremble.

*We have a great thirst for knowledge and learning; it*

*Burns in our hearts.*

(Quoted in Dunham 1997: 261)

Mary Frances Dunham and Daniel Dunham, her husband, whose death came a tad earlier than Ahmed Sofa’s (for I learned about the fact after reading an obituary by him), were honest friends of this Himalayan country trembling in itself, after all. It must be called a genuine act of gratitude to have the Dunhams recognised for what they stood erect for.

In her stoic conviction Mary Frances was a missionary, in the old Christian sense of the term, not technically though, with a shade of orientalism no doubt, and she more than loved this country and its people, the larger chunk of historical Bengal, as are manifest in all her compelling words before, during and after 1971.

In 1967, she was looking at the Bengali countrysides surrounding Dhaka, that city of “rustic patterns”, as “a great garden”:

“Although Dacca has long been the central market for this vast farmland, as well as a busy



cosmopolis of import and export, she has never lost the stamp of rural Bengal. The same village life which has survived successive foreign rules remains in the heart of Dacca’s urban society. The city itself resists the impositions of modern planning, uniform streets and orderly traffic. Village compounds and village life remain caught in the fibres of the expanding city, while the city spreads her suburbs among the fields and villages. Ox carts creak down city avenues; smoking busses lurch out to the *mofussil* areas like colts to the field. Songs of birds and of men accompany the raising of new buildings and the laying of roads. Cows, goats, geese, and children wander the streets as casually as they would stroll along a country lane. In spite of the technological and urban sophistication which world competition is forcing upon Dacca, it will take a long time to change her rustic patterns.” (Dunham 1967: 2)

On May 24, 1971, Mary Frances Dunham addressed a stately letter to Mrs. Richard S. Nixon in which she compared recent events in Bangladesh, namely “the cyclone and the revolution,” in her own *jarigan*, with funerals. She would describe Bangladesh in that letter as a land of many million people and “one of the world’s richest cultures”. She had the right to do her chores but note that she never uses

that obscene word “underdeveloped”, even for once. Looking through an ethnographer’s gaze, that is taking a view from afar, and reiterating the universality of modern Bengali civilisation, the level of culture that is Bengal, Mary Frances Dunham was a rare spirit among the humpty dumpty Americans who dared to go against the grain in such words as we can read here:

“Peace and universal love have been a tradition in Bengali culture from high to low, from great poets to illiterate boatmen. The tremendous losses which East Bengal has suffered, is suffering, and will suffer for a long time are a loss to the world at large of a highly cultivated people. There are few areas that can boast the level of culture we are now in danger of losing even before it has been properly recorded.” (Dunham 2009: 485)

In a personal appeal on behalf of some “educated and intelligent Americans, former employees of the US government, of international agencies, of a wide variety of missions, private foundations and companies, professors, doctors, [and] specialists,” made to Mrs. Richard S. Nixon and her husband, in their “capacities as prime representatives of [the US] abroad”, Mary Frances added her poetic voice to make sure that her country of domicile “not repeat past mistakes” and do “act more wisely and more firmly than they had in the past in view of the present tragedy”. By tragedy she meant an American tragedy, as I take it, for it was part of the United States official policy to keep the genocidal actions unleashed by Pakistan in Bangladesh out of view.

“Widely scattered geographically,” she was writing from her New York home, “informally silenced by organisations for whom we work, it has been especially difficult to make ourselves heard. Yet we have insights and information which only persons who have lived for some length of time in Bengal can have.”

She went on: “Now there is no way to revive the rickshawala who died on his gaily painted rickshaw, who could sing some of the most beautiful songs to be found anywhere. We cannot revive the students who gave us their sweetest thoughts, their longings to see the outside world some day, their eagerness to acquaint us with their own country. It is too late to save the professors chosen for execution who contributed their wit and individualism to the university communities in Pakistan and abroad.” (Dunham 2009: 485)

Like all her austere admirers I too will miss her. She was a beautiful woman, a human being par excellence. May her memory help us rediscover the meaning of Ovid’s Latin words revived in Sir Walter Raleigh’s rhyme:

*From thence our kind hard-hearted is, enduring pain and care, Approving that our bodies of a stony nature are.* (Quoted in Thoreau 1992: 3)

The writer is a Professor of the General Education Department at ULAB.

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4. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, ed. William Rossi, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).



(L) Daniel C. Dunham teaching architecture at EPUET in 1962. Photo: Collected. (M) Mary Frances Dunham with her tanpura in 1960s. Photo credit: Daniel C. Dunham. (R) Mary Frances Dunham with Ahmed Sofa in New York City. Photo: Collected.