

Classic Poetry Series

Sufia Kamal

- poems -

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Sufia Kamal (20 June 1911 - 20 November 1999)

Begum Sufia Kamal (Bengali: সুলফিয়া কামাল বেগম) was a poet, writer, organizer, feminist and activist from Bangladesh.

She was born to a Muslim family in Barisal, Bangladesh. She is one of the most widely recognized cultural personalities in Bangladesh. When she died in 1999, she was buried with full state honors, the first woman in Bangladesh to receive this honor.

Biography

Sufia Kamal was born on June 20, 1911 to Shayestabad's nawab family in Barisal. Although raised within strict purdah, that denied her of academic education, she was self-educated in Bengali, the ostracised language of the nawabs, with the encouragement of her mother, brother and a maternal uncle. While stealing into the literary works of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Begum Sara Taifur and Begum Motahera Banu, at the safe haven under the beds of the nawab palace, the young Sufia aspired to be a writer herself.

Although her first writing "Sainik Badhu" (Soldier's Bride), published in Taroon (Youth) magazine in 1923, was a short story, Sufia became known more as a poet. She received acclamations from both the maestros of Bangla literature Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam. In fact, it was the progressive Nazrul, a strong believer of women's emancipation, who, after coming across Sufia's work assisted and encouraged her to write poems regularly for Saugat, a renowned magazine from Kolkata.

"A wave of joy swept through our house, as she entered. Once she was done asking after everyone, she would always leave her writings on the table and tell my father to do whatever he liked with them. She never gave a heading to her poems," recalls Nurjahan Begum, the editor of the Begum magazine and daughter of the editor of Saugat, Mohammad Nasiruddin. Sufia Kamal became the first editor of Begum, when this pioneer weekly magazine for Muslim women started its journey in 1947.

Perhaps her seemingly nonchalance towards her own poems emerged out of her indifference to publicity or because words would naturally flow out of her pen regardless of the situation. "Maa wrote spontaneously," relates Sajed Kamal, the poet's youngest son. "One who had found poetry in life, did not need a special time to write it. Even when she used to cook at noon, if anyone from a magazine came and asked for her poems, she would tell them to sit and immediately write a poem."

Describing Sufia Kamal as a holistic poet, he adds, "She wrote about life and life involves everything – romance and social issues. She never compartmentalised her life. She wrote about political and contemporary issues, at the same time her writings had historical context and concern for the future." Sufia Kamal in an interview with The Daily Star, called herself a romantic poet. However, she admitted that as time changed her writings became more concerned with socio-economic, cultural and political issues as well as women's issues.

Her apprenticeship at social work began in 1925, when she joined Barisal's Matri Mongol society as the only Muslim member. Later, she became a member of Begum Rokeya's Anjumane Khaowatine Islam, a social organisation and was nominated the first Muslim woman member of Indian Women's Federation in 1931. Surviving through the difficult times of 1930s, after her first husband's death, she again committed herself to social cause. During the riots of Kolkata, she conducted a shelter centre at Lady Brabourne College and afterwards opened a kindergarten school with help from the members of Mukul Fouj.

However, the poet in her interview with The Daily Star mentioned the 1950s and 1960s as the time when she actually started fighting for socio-economic and political causes. From leading the Martyrs Day march in February 1952 to the Sanskritik Swadhikar Andolon (Movement for Cultural Autonomy) in 1961, she continued to challenge state imposed oppression. She was elected as the founding president of the renowned cultural organisation Chhayanaut that emerged out of the movement.

According to Md Sarwar Ali, Vice President of Chhayanaut, Sufia Kamal used the cultural movement as the vehicle to form an equitable, just, secular, social and democratic society. "Her political ideology emphasised on changing the mental setup of the people of the society," he adds. As a result, Sufia Kamal never became a member of any political party. She, nevertheless, was close to left politics and in Worker Party's president Rashed Khan Menon's opinion, "She had an inclination towards communism because it talked about the empowerment of women which was always her main focus." He quotes Sufia Kamal: "If women are not empowered, there will not be any development in the country."

Mujahidul Islam Selim, general secretary of Communist Party of Bangladesh mentions in his memoir on Sufia Kamal that in the 1960s she often came as a guest at the different programmes organised by "Sanskriti Sangshad", an organisation closely related to the leftist student body "Chhatra Union". He writes, "It was the Pakistani period. The country was under military rule. Political leaders were in jail. The Communist Party was banned. It was considered a sin for a gentleman to even pronounce the word 'communist'. Most of the leaders of the party were either in jail or in hiding. Right at that time she wrote a poem praising the communist."

"Bipul bisshoy prithibir

Joy joy joygaan kaste-haturir!"

(The world is amazed... victory to the sickle and hammer)

Not surprisingly, she supported Soviet Union during the Cold War and was elected as the chairperson of Pak-Soviet Friendship Society in 1966. Visiting Russia on two occasions before and after liberation, she was captivated by the empowerment, self-awareness and dignity of Russian women. In fact the creation of Mahila Parishad in 1970 was influenced by a combination of all these political ideologies of the time.

"Before the Liberation War, when everyone was coming up with their demands – the 6-points, 11-points – the female student leaders thought that it was the right time to talk about women's rights and equal rights. Before that, they had already started a signature campaign demanding the bail of political leaders who were in jail. That's when they came across Sufia Kamal. Because of her wide acceptance all female leaders from different political

groups and professions, formed the Mahila Parishad, with the poet as its nucleus," relates Maleka Banu, General Secretary of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad.

Despite her demure appearance, she was resolute in her stance even before the mightiest autocrat like Ayub Khan. At a meeting, with artistes and intellectuals of Dhaka, Ayub insulted the Bengalis as "haiwan" (beasts). Sufia lost no time in retorting back, "Tab to aapvi janaab haiwanon ki badshah hotey hain" (Then, sir, you are the leader of the beasts).

During the liberation war, Sufia Kamal stayed in her house at Road-32, Dhanmondi under the watchful eyes of the Pakistani Army. This did not stop her from helping the freedom fighters secretly and sending her two young daughters to the war. Concerns from the international community about her safety, forced the Pakistani administration to air her interview where she appeared only for 90 seconds saying, "I am not dead." She did not answer any other question neither did she show her face.

Even after liberation she did not bow her head to state elements. Although she had a congenial relationship with her neighbour Bangabandhu, she never hesitated to disagree with the highly esteemed leader. Md Sarwar Ali reminisces, "Sufia Kamal was very close to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. After liberation, Chhayanaut was given a monthly government allotment, but after a year they made it a conditional allotment. Then Sufia Kamal said, 'Chhayanaut will not receive any allotment with any condition.' She always wanted Chhayanaut to be self-reliant and sustainable. Today the Chhayanaut Bhaban has been built without the help of any government or private donations."

In spite of her multi-faceted activism, she never forgot or neglected her duties to her family. "We hardly used to have ordinary or commonplace food, because mother had a keen interest in cooking. She liked to prepare special dishes. She used to cook different types of food everyday," says her daughter, human rights activist Sultana Kamal.

In fact Sufia Kamal's cooking is praised even by Nurjahan Begum. "Often on Sundays she came and cooked at our house in Kolkata. She used to tell my mother 'Nuru's mother you do the cutting and preparing of the spices, I will do the cooking'. My mother tried but her dishes were never as delicious as Sufia Khala's," Nurjahan reminisces.

Calling her mother a super-active woman, Sultana Kamal, Executive Director, Ain o Salish Kendra recounts how Sufia Kamal, despite having sufficient house-hold help, would always do chores like cooking, washing clothes, sewing dresses, reading bedtime stories to the children at night, on a regular basis. Growing up at her crowded house, she never felt annoyed by the flow of continuous visitors. Says Sultana Kamal, "One interesting thing was, those who came to her, they always felt that they were the most and best loved person by her. When she spoke to anyone, she would give her full attention to that person, irrespective of whether he was a hawker, or a high official or an ambassador.

"She was always cautious about one thing that she would never encourage any of us to join her organisations. For example, I always had been pressurised by others to become a member of Mahila Parishad. But she said, 'It is better that you don't. There you would be khalamma's (Sufia Kamal) daughter. That would create a couple of disadvantages. Firstly, if you say something and they do not agree with you, they won't say it out loud because you are khalamma's daughter. Second you by, will never be judged by your merit.'"

Sufia Kamal's secular identity never conflicted with her piety. Md Sarwar Ali recounts, "Every December 16 at the Savar National monument, after singing the national anthem with us, she would say a prayer for the martyrs." Sultana Kamal recalls how her mother never reciprocated any personal attacks made on her by religious extremists. "She told us that a person would behave as per his or her characteristics. When a dog opens its

mouth it cannot do anything but bark. So why should you get angry at them. You go on doing your work the way you want to. Look at your conscience all the time. Do that which is good for others. Do not heed other people's words," remembers Sultana Kamal.

And Sufia Kamal did not heed to others – be it Ayub, Mujib, Ershad, Hasina or Khaleda or any other political figure. She kept her dignity high and silently went on doing what her conscience demanded of her, all through her 88 years of life. She once wrote to Nasiruddin and those lines aptly summarise her life and philosophy:

"I'll go on doing my work silently, calmly. I'll remove the thorns along the path – so that, for those who come after, thorns don't prick their feet; so that, for their thorn-pricked feet they don't fall behind. That much I'll do with whatever strength I have."

Literature

A short story Shainik Bodhu which she wrote was published in a local paper in 1923. Her literary career took off after her first poetry publication. Her first book of poems, Sanjher Maya (Evening Enchantment), came out in 1938, bearing a foreword from Kazi Nazrul Islam and attracting praise from critics like Rabindranath Tagore. Sanjher Maya was translated in Russian as Санжер Майя улу Суфия Камал in 1984.

In 1937 she published her first collection of short stories, Keyar Kanta (Thorns of the Keya Tree).

Though she called herself a romantic poet, her work more and more reflected the struggles to preserve the Bengali language and culture and to fight Pakistani rulers.

Activism

In 1947, when "Shaptahik Begum" was first published, Sufia Kamal became its first editor. In October of that year after the partition of India she came to Dhaka. During a huge clash between Hindu and Muslim of that time Kamal worked for their friendship and joined in Peace Committee. In 1948, when Purbo Pakistan Mohila Committee formed, she became its chairman. Kamal's activism continued in 1952, with the Language Movement. In 1961, when the Pakistani government banned Rabindra Sangeet (Songs of Rabindranath), she became involved in the movement among Bengalis that ensued in 1961. During the mass uprising in 1969, which demanded the resignation of General Ayub Khan, she promoted the cause by forming Mohila Sangram Parishad (Women's Struggle Group). She was involved in the 1971 Liberation War and all later movements against dictatorial regimes. During Bangladesh's struggle for independence from Pakistan in the early 1970s she worked to help women hurt by the war. She also worked with an organization to try to bring to justice those Pakistani officials whom the Bangladeshis considered war criminals.

In later life, she made women's rights her top priority and headed Bangladesh's largest women's organization, Mahila Parishad, for many years. She did not see the oppression of women as mainly a class issue. She was also the first Chairperson of BRAC (1972–1980).

Kamal was also instrumental in getting the first women's dormitory of Dhaka University to be named Rokeya Hall, after Begum Rokeya.

Awards

Sufia Kamal received nearly fifty major awards, including the Tamgha-i-Imtiaz (1961), a major national award conferred by the Pakistani government, but which Sufia Kamal returned in 1969 in protest at the government's oppressive treatment of Bengalis, the Bangla Academy Award for Literature (1962), the Ekushey Padak (1976), the Nasiruddin Gold Medal (1977), the Muktaadhara Puraskar (1982), the Jatyo Kabita Parishad Award

(National Poetry Council Award, 1995), the Women's Federation for World Peace Crest (1996), the Begum Rokeya Padak (1996), the Deshbandhu CR Das Gold Medal (1996), and the Independence Day Award (1997). She also received a number of international awards, among them the Lenin Centenary Jubilee Medal from the Soviet Union in 1970, and the Czechoslovakia Medal in 1986.

Death

Eserleri:

1. Mrttikar Ghran (The Fragrance of Earth)
2. Ekattarer Diary (Diary of '71)
3. Benibinyas Samay To Ar Nei (No More Time for Braiding Your Hair)
4. Ekale Amader Kal (In This Time, Our Time)

Love-Timid

Even now the night's intoxication has not passed,
eyes filled with passion;
the string of ?iuli-flowers in the parting of my hair
has wilted, the world is overwhelmed with scent.
I have kept the window-shutters open,
extinguishing my lamp -
so the dew may enter and cool
the fearful outcry of my heart!
Dream's intoxication in my eyes, in my breast
a message of hope -
the distant woodland song, birds' twittering
will enter here I know.
Rising with a sudden start I see: my heart's monarch,
leaning in silence against my thigh - bedecked with flowers.
He has bestowed heaven on my heated thirst;
my weak and timid heart has trembled,
pounding full of love.

[Translated by Carolyne Wright with Ayesha Kabir]

Sufia Kamal

That Love Of Yours

I've taken possession of that love of yours
that fills the earth's vessel till it overflows,
filling my eyes, filling my heart,
and filling my two hands.
How unbearable is this joy, that this love is so intense.
With the touch like arrows of its golden rays
the inner bud blooms, as quickly as grass.
Illumined in my heart, it brings jewel-inlaid riches;
that's why I'm wealthy, my joy will not perish.
With images ever new, this world has gratified me,
given as it is to praise, to perfumed blossoms dripping honey.
The diurnal light of sun, at every watch of the night,
merging hour by hour with your love's every letter, will set.
Ever-new messages I hear;
my heart is overcome - so in love I compose my answering letter.
Warmed from the Sindhu's expanse of river,
these clouds upon clouds of gentle moist air
ever bring these love letters, then carry them afar.
The eager heart grows devoted as an unmarried girl,
so it longs to compose scores upon scores
of ever-new messages of love and amours.
The heart fills with joy, grows voluble,
so I've gathered hence,
from the mortal earth, from the horizon's expanse:
impassioned, illumined, that love of yours.

[Translated by Carolyn Wright with Ayesha Kabir]

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