

Inspirational, Imaginative, Unconventional- Razia Khan Amin

FAKRUL ALAM

There is hardly anything anywhere in the net to indicate how good Razia Khan Amin (1936-2011) (aka Razia Khan, or Mrs. Amin to us students) truly was as a writer, but in her lifetime she was awarded, first the Bangla Academy Puroshkar for her literary works (1975) and then the Ekushey Padak (1997) for her overall contribution to Bangladesh's culture and letters. Novelist, poet, academic as well as an exceptional person, she deserves a lot more appreciation from us all in English, although we must be thankful for Junaidul Huq's characteristically heart-felt and generous tribute, "Razia Khan Amin: Teacher, Poet, Novelist" (*The Daily Star*, January 14, 2012).

Razia Khan was a truly colorful person. She was not only precocious but also ahead of her time in her ideas and ways. She was also always herself, which is to say lively, mercurial and fascinating—almost a diva.

If my memory (always unreliable about dates!) serves me right on this occasion, Razia Khan became my tutorial teacher towards the end of January 1971. The tutorial format in place in the University of Dhaka's English department then allowed for students to come close to their teachers but I can't remember her becoming intimate with any of us in our group initially. But it was probably the third time we met her that she came alive for me. I had written a tutorial essay on *Pride and Prejudice* and scanning it she had come across the word 'articulate' that I used to emphasize how easily Jane

Austen communicated her insights into human relationships to her readers. "Articulate" she exclaimed excitedly; "What a good word to use!" And I felt, all of a sudden, that our class had come alive with her. I was grateful, too, for the attention she lavished on me afterwards—all because she felt that here was one student to use the English language originally.

But our tutorial classes came to an end unexpectedly because of the gathering political storm that would only clear up with the emergence of Bangladesh in December 1971. Teachers and students had dispersed after March 26, fleeing the Pakistanis and trying to stay alive frantically any which way they could.

Razia Khan probably left for England sometime in 1971; we were deprived of her teaching for a couple of years even after classes had resumed in early 1972. My second memorable encounter with her was in the classroom for she was assigned to teach a couple of Shakespeare's plays to us M. A. students. As a teacher too, she would teach in an uninterested sort of way in patches but would take fire every once in a while. One day in class, she told us how upsetting Shakespeare's Hamlet's predicament was to her. "Hamlet is like a rose," she exclaimed, waxing eloquent on his vulnerability and musings on death and love. Brash and over-confident at this time, I raised my hand and said, "M'am you are trying to romanticize Hamlet." "Romanticize?" she exclaimed

"Do you know what the word means?" "Yes" I said brashly once again. "Seeing him with rose-colored glasses." Visibly upset, she ignored me for the rest of the class, leaving me contrite and with the feeling that I had been a bit too impetuous and not a little unmannerly.

My third encounter with Mrs. Amin was quite memorable and showed how unconventional and romantic she truly was. I was a Lecturer in the department of English by then and had the bright idea that we would stage Euripides's *Alcestis* in a departmental event. I floated the idea in a faculty meeting and volunteered to take charge of the production. Mrs. Amin's face lighted up and she said, "I'd like to play the role of Alcestis!" But the idea of me directing her, a senior teacher, gave me cold feet. I thought the best way to deal with the situation was to forget the idea of staging the play, leaving her no doubt baffled and unhappy by my withdrawal from the venture.

I can't tell whether she had been nursing the unhappiness I had caused her in the second and third encounters, but I did manage to rile her completely in the fourth encounter I had with her. This time though, I offended her unwittingly by declaring in a faculty meeting that departmental teachers shirking examination duty should be taken to task. I meant this as a general observation but she felt that it was directed specifically at her. Irritated by my stance, she left the meeting angrily and stopped talking to me for

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some time afterwards.

But I wouldn't be writing this piece if I didn't feel that these encounters were all that I had to say about her. Some years later, when my book of translation, *Jibanananda Das: Selected Poems* came out she seemed to

have forgotten whatever grudges she had borne against me over the years and given them up completely because of her delight in her student's work. The first thing she did now was scribble me a note where she expressed her delight at my translations. The second thing she did at this time was to gift me a complete set of her works, including the award winning ones.

From that time onwards, Mrs. Amin, always greeted me smilingly. Clearly, she had too much affection and love of literature in her to nurse a grudge unreasonably long. Clearly, she was every inch the writer and lover of literature who had the generosity to acknowledge and welcome others. All along, I realized, it was I who had been too conventional and too bound by tradition to respond to her actions. She was, indeed, affectionate and welcoming, albeit unconventional and whimsical at times.

Razia Khan, indeed, was way ahead of her time, a pioneering writer, a very good novelist and poet, truly bilingual and patriotic as well as enlightened as a person. In her writings as in her life she was inspirational, imaginative, unconventional—a path breaker. Her writings deserve study and reprinting, and I hope that she will come to be fully appreciated for her works and her *presence* in our literature by generations to come.

Fakrul Alam is the Pro Vice-Chancellor of East-West University. He is also the Consulting Editor of Star Literature and Review Pages.