

A TRIBUTE TO MY MOTHER



By Abdulrazak Fazal *Updated: August 2020*

Soon the Muharram moon will be sighted but for me it will be a different Muharram, for my beloved mother who all along had been with me remains no more. Just before Eid she had expressed her feelings for the coming Muharram and reminded me to set aside her marsia and nauha cassettes, hardly realizing that by Muharram she would be gone away from this world.

Just a mention of Muharram and she would be filled with nostalgia for the Zanzibar days. Our house in Kiponda was right in front of the Junni mosque and we were literally part of its ritualistic events. The whitewash, the volunteers doing the cleaning, the imambara walls adorned with black cloth and the windows hung with black flags heralded Muharram. The imambara emanated air filled with oud fragrance as the smoke from the burnt oud urn spiraled over the glittering alams, mimber and every corner of the imambara.

The house also vibrated with melodious marsia and nauha. It was the era of the devout Khoja zealots and the soulful rendering by Mohamedhusain Ahmed ('bole imame umam, parda uthalo koi', 'jab akheri rukhsatko Husain'), Murtaza Bandali (kyukar juda huva sare', arbaike sogwaro alwida') or Jaffer Hassanali Mulla Raza (dushmankobhi khuda na dikhaye pisarka daag', kabre Husain alwida') accentuated the emotionally charged atmosphere. The ladies who did not attend the majlis would come to our house to listen to it and even view alams and shabihs through the windows. On Ashura and Chehlum nights and Chehlum evening the house would be packed with ladies who came to see the julus.

Muharram evoked many poignant memories for us. The ladies gathered at our place to knead the dough and shape it into laadus which were then distributed as fateha (nyaz) during majlis in our house. It was also customary for my mother to dip stock of old cloths in a container with certain liquid to blacken them as all of us must wear black. In particular I've vivid memories of holding her finger and attending the 'Mehndi' ceremony on the 7th of Muharram at Nai Misid. She moved around with thal of fruits along with other ladies and encircled small girls holding mehndi plates and flags. A particular incident she would often relate to us was the 1947 Muharram that she did in Karbala where at the Nasser Noormohamed Musafarkhana she conducted the mehndi ritual on the 7th of Muharram and

besides mehndi prepared her specialty halua ya badamu (almond sweetmeat) despite my father's hospitalization in Karbala. Her friends Fatubai Abdulla Panju (Fatu Magawa) and Kursumbai Peera Champsi who were co zawars always vouched for this incident.

Sadly, in Daressalaam due to ill health most of her time was spent in bed. The cassettes of Murtaza Bandali with those old 'Masaebe Panjatan' marsias had great sentimental value for her and she would endlessly listen to them. Her selfless devotion to the services and azadari must get her marked out as an ardent azadar. In Zanzibar whenever the afternoon julus passed through our street she would hand an embroidered piece of cloth to me to be delivered to Maalim Mohamed Jivraj who led the julus. Here her younger sister Sugrabai Master who was an attendant at Mehfile Abbas would always send for laash and alam cloth to be embroidered or stitched and she derived immense satisfaction from doing this work.

Now her tape deck by the side of a window otherwise playing 'ghamka paigham leke aya ye mahe muharram...' is silent. The room is a sad reminder of her final hours when throughout the night she groaned and shivered. My wife Fatma, sister Zainab and myself kept around the clock vigil by her bedside. After the morning prayers I called my brother in Arusha to inform him that her end was nearing. I stood momentarily in the balcony to view the colour of the dawn sky of that fateful Monday, the 24th of December 2007 and it looked grim and gloomy to me. The clock on the wall was ticking away. It struck seven. Her breathing was slowing down. We fed her with khake shafa and turned her bed towards kibla. My wife who was by her bedside tried to nudge her, but her breathing had stopped. She was absolutely still and there was serene expression on her face. I bowed solemnly towards her and leaned forward to kiss her cheeks. I was crying in silent and held out my hand to my sister and wife who were wailing. They ran into my arms to hug me. The doctor who had turned up the previous day was called. He pronounced her dead.

I tried to control myself and called my sisters in London and New York. I could not talk much as I choked on my words. Outside the house it was normal as if nothing had happened. Gradually the neighbours and relatives started to gather. A little later the hearse arrived from the mosque. The door opened with a frown to give way to the stretcher that was brought in. My mother who used to pray for me silently was parting from me. A terrific sadness overcame me as I saw her being laid into the stretcher and taken away from the house. I felt myself completely helpless and could do nothing. My mother was gone forever. Nothing would ever be the same. Her bed was removed, her medicine taken away and bit by bit everything hers taken off. All signs of her have begun to vanish.

But to me her sweet smell stays in the room, the room that you saw on entering the house and where she would be lying on her bed and giving everybody her broad smile. Right from the first night of Muharram she would attire herself in black till the 8th of Rabiulawwal. Whenever I went to the mosque for a Muharram majlis she

would take out her money and give it to me for offering to shabih. She would be anxiously waiting for my return when I handed her a jasmine plucked from its bunch placed on the shabih. I would then relate to her what the Zakir had recited and her eyes moistened. As a child I remember hearing the story of Karbala from her and playing with a cradle that she would make from her handkerchief whilst at the mosque. On Ashura day I would forsake my shyness and fetch nyaaz for her from the mosque. I would then rush home to serve it to her.

Alas, my mother is dead and gone. How can I ever forget my 'Bai'? That is what we called her. If I was late from work, she besought Allah and Imams and offered up 'tasbeeh' or 2 'rakaat nammaz' for my safe return. If I had headache or slight illness and did not come out of my room she would repeatedly ask my wife for me and even send her maid to the room to check if I was alright. In the 1960s I was in Bombay for four years. During this period never a week passed without her writing a letter to me. Every Monday downstairs at the hostel I eagerly awaited the postman to deliver her letter. My colleagues envied me as they hardly received any mail. She would fill the entire page, front and back, writing from top to bottom without leaving any gap and saw to it that she covered all the stories and the latest happenings. I had made two box files out of these letters and retained them till 1990s when I destroyed them as water had got into the files and rusted the letters.

She was an avid and voracious reader of Gujarati literature. The two cupboards on the first floor of our house in Zanzibar were full of Gujarati magazines, periodicals, and classic novels by Shaida and some other writers. Her brother Fidabhai from Dsm kept their flow continuous. A number of her friends and acquaintances came to our house at night to have their letters written by her. They expressed their thoughts and messages and she would jot down the contents in the letter.

She was a person of great humility and in particular very kind to the poor and downtrodden people. In Zanzibar, the ladies from 'bewakhana' often came to our place to partake in the meal or we visited them to offer some food. Her honesty was her excellent quality and recognized by everybody. She never lied. At times it put us in jeopardy, for even at the Customs or as a pretext of saving certain situation she would not lie. So many ladies trusted her with their valuables which she would store for them in a safe place. We at times gave her a scolding for shouldering such responsibilities. Our neighbour and her friend [Sakubai Jessa \(Saku Sukari Mawe\)](#) while leaving for Dsm had left her ornaments with her. Poor Sakubai was one of the victims of that tragic sea accident in 1970 and never returned to Zanzibar. That placed a big burden on us. Eventually her son Mohamedhusainbhai (Babu) had to be contacted upon his return from overseas and the ornaments handed back to him.

In her heyday she was held in very high regard and responsible for fixing many couples into a holy matrimonial bliss. Her untiring toil in shopping cloths and ornaments, especially for the marriage occasions, was exemplar of her unstinting assistance to her relatives, friends as well as outsiders. So many from Dsm and other

towns on the mainland would write to her to make various purchases for them. Not that she worked on commission. In fact, the ‘sonaras’ (goldsmiths) and ‘darjis’ (tailors) who were well known to her induced her to earn something out of it but she would vehemently decline the offer. Furthermore, she embroidered the green coloured ‘Imam Zamin piece of cloth’ by inscribing ‘Ya Ali’ on it for the bride and the groom. Also, her aptness for making ‘masalo’ (sugary coconut chips of varied colours) had drawn popular demand.

Besides Zanzibar she used to reminisce about her time spent in Kutch and Jamnagar. That prompted my eventual visits to these places. An intriguing narrative of her anecdotes was her return to Zanzibar from Kutch by dhow. When they were about to reach the shores of Mombasa their dhow was trapped in a severe storm. The ‘Maklo’ (Kutchi term for the crew leader) pleaded for forgiveness saying that nothing but a miracle could save them and requested them to offer prayers. Everyone was crying. In a dizzy and hazy state, she took out her ‘mor’ (clay tablet) and sprinkled ‘khake shafa’ on the traumatic Indian Ocean. After some time, the storm subsided. Indeed, it was a miracle. Eventually they reached Mombasa and later Zanzibar.

She was a treasure of traditional values. Her profound knowledge of Khoja customs and traditions and her insight into the Zanzibar Khoja families right through the Kutch and Jamnagar days enabled me fascinating research into our history. She was in a position to easily find out where one person/family/connection was in relation to another. She died at the ripe age of 96 years, but her mind was sound and sharp. Till her last days she used to tell us very vivid account of the past and her experiences. Now I have none to respond to my queries. For us family members an era has come to an end. When she was there so many people came to our house to see her. Our contacts from abroad whilst in Dsm always came to greet her. Now there won’t be anybody to pay us a visit. Her memory will linger forever. May Allah rest her soul with Eternal Bliss in the vicinity of Chahrda Masumeen.

Tribute to my mother [Mariambai Sheriff Fazal \(nee Mariambai Khamis Damji\)](#).

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