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IN SEARCH OF A BETTER PLACE...EXPLORING SUSHMITA BANERJEE'S WORK
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ABSTRACT

Life is not measured by the number of breaths u take, but by the number of moments that take your breath away. Sometimes the daredevil attempt to search for the unknown can be a nightmare too. I think Sushmita Banerjee had also felt the same after coming back from Afghanistan. She married an Afghani Muslim Janbaz Khan and went to her 'sasural' in Afghanistan. There she experienced tremendous physical and mental torments from her husband's family and Taliban. Her dreams shattered being alone there for seven years. Meanwhile her husband left her for no reason being threatened by the Taliban. He escaped to India like a thief. That innocent girl was left alone among the strangers. Her home was calling her but there was no way to escape.

As every situation gives us experiences that clumsy situation also does that. Here she reveals herself as a strong woman who can fight against every oppression. She is no less than a man in power and intellect. But all her efforts to end corruptions end when she is shot dead in Afghanistan by the Taliban. She has to suffer and burn to reach the state of experience from innocence. She has been through hell. She has to fight. She has to look into the fire and smile. So, "if not now, when?"

Keywords: humanity vs. brutality, life-long experience, victory over tortures, victory of women power

Introduction

Ami voy korbana, voy korbana...(I will not fear, I will not...)

"This is like suicide"

That was what renowned novelist Samaresh Mukherjee told to Anandabazar Patrika when he heard the news of the death of Banerjee. And with that news the question which came into our mind was "why did she went back to Afghanistan when she knew that she would not be back?" She married Afghani Muslim Janbaz Khan in 1989 and went to Afghanistan to meet the members of her husband's family and the dreams were shattered being tortured there for seven years. Janbaz Khan who was only her own also left her alone and escaped to India being threatened by the Taliban. She saw the torture of the Taliban as well as Afghani men who considered their wives as slaves. She was about to lose her identity. Her name was changed in Sayeda Kamala and she was called as "sahib kamal". She was promised that she would be back within seven months but she was gulled. There she adopted a baby girl from her own family named Tinni and that little girl

was only her own on that grimpen mire. She tried quite a number of times to escape but wherever she asked help she proved failure. That was not that everyone was evil. Rather they were helpless in the hand of patriarchy which engulfed the lives of women. Her condition was like Caliban in *The Tempest*. Caliban was also in search of freedom and his identity. They both were failed at first but repeated try made things easy. There was no doubt that Banerjee had guts and determination. Moreover she has to leave Tinni in Afghanistan when she escaped. Had she gone to bring her daughter in India? She had braved huge obstacles and even beating in her own family for her relationship with Janbaz who later became her husband. She again struggled in a conservative family in Afghanistan when she was living there. She was almost locked at her home. Infact she tried a number of times to escape and she did through a hole in her wall but gain captured by the Taliban and as a runaway bride when was about to be executed but one of her uncle saved her. She was daredevil and fearless. At last she managed to come back to India persuading the Taliban that as being an Indian she had right to go back in her own country. After that harrowing escape from Afghanistan she came to India and she was living in Kolkata with her husband and at that time she wrote the book *Kabuliwalar Bangali Bou* (Kabuliwala's Bengali Wife) and which was the best seller of that time. When she was again preparing to go back to Afghanistan her neighbours asked her whether she was not afraid to go again. She smiled saying that there was no reason to afraid. She went though we did not know why, but she went and that unbelievable thing happened. She was shot dead outside a Madrasa in Afghanistan riddled at least twenty bullets. And the news said that she was raped before her murder. It was assumed that they took revenge as she wrote about them in her book. She was being warned quite a number of times by the Taliban. They also told that they would give her punishment if she did not check herself. But being fearless she was trying to improve the condition of women and after coming back in India she told that women's lives were still circumscribed but situation was getting better. When she approached to go there for the second time her family was against her going back. They reminded her that the Taliban would not leave her if she went. Now we might think what would be the reason of their anger upon her. The reason might be that she wanted to expose them in her later books and wanted to show the readers how Afghanistan was faring under democracy. She was not a trained doctor but she used to give woman medicine based on her own reading and she got success in that work. Her small medical store in her house was a lifeline for many women in Afghanistan who used to die without medicine and doctor and their husbands were careless regarding the matter. Because if they died their husbands would bring new bride within a few days. That was the rule of the country. Banerjee was also documenting the lifestyle of the women in Afghanistan. The Taliban as well as Afghani men were against the progression of medical science and they warned Sushmita Banerjee time and again and she did not stop her noble work. She showed throughout her life that a girl could do anything if she was firm at her decision. "Didi showed us how a Bengali girl could stand up against the Taliban fatwa" (Ujjwal Chatterjee, director of escape from Taliban). All her efforts went in ashes when she was shot dead by the Taliban on 5th September 2013. Though that was still a mystery whether the Taliban murdered her or she was murdered by her own husband. Because it was said that her husband had an extra marital relationship with one of his relatives. U might ask me why did I choose this work as my dissertation topic. I chose it because I was driven by the mystery of her life, her struggle and I also wanted to figure and refigure her point of view in contrast with mine. And that was a small try from my side to make justice with the piece.

Love is blind...

"Love looks not with the eyes. But with the mind, and therefore is winged Cupid painted blind"
(William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

She was also a victim of Cupid. Being a Hindu Brahmin she married an Afghani Muslim Janbaz khan under the special marriage act on July 2, 1988. They did not reveal their marriage at first but when her parents discovered that they tried to get them divorced and that made her flee from Kolkata to Afghanistan, Janbaz's native land. He promised her to take her back to India after six months only. He came back to India where he had her own business but Banerjee could not come back because the Taliban did not allow her. She was dreaming that her "sasural" would be a place of love and comfort but her dreams shattered living there for seven long years. Reaching in "sasural" she met her three brothers-in-law Kala, Musha, Sawali and their wives and children. She also met Gulgutti, the first wife of her husband and she was dumb like hell hearing that

Janbaz married Gulgutti before ten years of her marriage. She was speechless. She witnessed the Taliban used Islam wrongly. They made beard compulsory for men and to attend the mosque five times a day so that they could count the number of men living in the village and also could dominate them whenever they would rebel against them. They were the dark side of human nature. They seemed to be like Mr. Hyde (The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Louis Stevenson). They did only bad. They burned all the televisions, books and stopped the newspaper service because they were against of all scientific progression.

The condition of Afghani women was no less than hell. They had no medicine when they were ill. There was no hospital in Patiya, the village where Sushmita Banerjee lived. They were not allowed to step out of their house. They could not go to the hospital because there other man will touch them. But they often had illicit relationship within their family. And when it was focussed the woman was bitterly beaten and severely punished. But no one would say anything to the man. Women had to give birth to their babies at home in an unscientific way. That process caused death to many women. It was very common in Afghanistan. Here she was telling her readers about a tragic incident that caused the death of one of her sisters in law. Despite of having seven sons her husband wanted more. Her baby was delivered at home. But placenta did not come out. She was in pain. And a midwife was called and cut that with scissors. Her sister in law died in pain. No one cared and family members were busy celebrating the birth of the son. Might be on the very next day he would bring her new wife and forget that girl. Sushmita found no school or college for women in Patiya because taking formal education was heinous crime for women and once they were objected the men would take them in a field and shoot them. But the situation was not like that before. They used to enjoy in occasions. They used to dance and sing in weddings and other occasions but when the Taliban came into power those ceremonies became hushed affair. Sushmita Banerjee opened a clinic there and used to interact with women and made them realise how they were dominated. But in May 1995 for the first time a few men came and broke her clinic. That was when she decided that she had to leave. She tried repeatedly but all efforts ended in ashes at first. She was caught the Taliban and was to be executed as a runaway bride. But Dranai chacha saved her saying the Taliban that they had no right to murder an Indian. That was the country of darkness. A country which faced the idea of timelessness. The country saw the riot between Taliban versus Rabbani. Rabbani government wanted the progression of woman. They wanted to make them earn. They were broad minded. Rabbani was killed by the Taliban and the dream of progression also shattered. That was the place where people who leave from the house for work had no assurance that they would be back safely. Even they were not safe at home also. Firing and black out were common there. She was called as "sahib kamal" or rather we would pronounce "sahib ka mal"? yeah they were considered as commodities not a human being. In that reference there was an incident which she stated. She talked about Kakali Roy, another victim of love who was blind in love and married an Afghani man Nawab Khan and came to Afghanistan. When she came here she got to know that her husband was already married and she would have to spend her first night with another wife of that man. Nawab Khan was also not ashamed to get intimate with new bride in front of her old bride. Kakali read *Kabuliwala* in her childhood and fantasised about Rahamat and thought Afghanistan would be like how Rahamat described that. She questioned Sushmita "is it the land of Rahamat?" "Was Rahamat real or was he a fantasy of Rabindranath Tagore?" Banerjee consoled herself seeing the condition of Kakali who was also a victim in the hand of patriarchy. Her condition was worse than Sushmita. There was no way to escape. They were only darkness and they were puppets who were chained to obey all the rules. Banerjee remembered another incident when they were going to Gajani from their village they witnessed firing in front of them and a few masked people came and asked *Musalman na Kafer?* (Muslim or kafer?). At that point of time they were saved for Janbaz. Sushmita remember the times they had spent together and also asked her did Janbaz truly love her? If he loved her why did he leave without any notice? There was a strange rule among Afghani men that they did not divorce their wives. They had to stay with them. And when he would bring another bride old one would be more powerful and the new bride had to listen every word of the old bride. She has to obey her. She also told us that Afghanistan and Pakistan contrasted each other. In Pakistan she saw women roaming here and there without any man where in Afghanistan they had to take help of a man even to go to the neighbourhood. Day by day their lifestyle seemed to be like a nightmare to her. She thought about her mother. She missed her mother. She wanted to take rest on her lap. She was not habituated in their fooding habit but

she adjusted at least she tried to. Here she found that the currency stated from rupees fifty (in Indian currency it was worth rs.50). One litre kerosene oil had cost four thousand rupees in Afghani (the name of afghan currency). She was a rule breaker. She wanted to be free. For that reason she was bitterly beaten by her brothers-in-law. But all of us knew that "idle brain is devil's workshop". She had nothing to do here and that idle time gave her chance to think about freedom. She searched the way to escape time and again. It would had been better if she was in jail. That could give her solace but being imprisoned in her own house caused a permanent scar in her mind.

Escape... in search of freedom

At last that day came when she finally could arrange a jeep for her that will take her to Islamabad in Pakistan and there she would go to Indian embassy. She hoped against a hope that she would be able to see her motherland again. She would be able to meet her family after a long time. She had not met them for years. She was happy. She took Tinni with her but no..."man proposes god disposes". She was cheated and sent to the Taliban. Again she faced tremendous torture. But one positive side of Sushmita Banerjee was she did not lose hope and waited for second chance. Another day came. She tried to escape at night. She escaped through a hole in her wall and ran overnight. She got victory over all her fears. She took the name of her Hindu god. She took the name of Allah. But no!!! Again she was arrested because one of her neighbours recognised her as Janbaz's wife. After this incident the Taliban issue a fatwa against her. And she was scheduled to die on July 22, 1995. But we should not forget she had always been a fighter. Dranai chacha who was the village headman rescued her from the Taliban. She had a soft corner for her and was affectionate to her. On the day of her escape she grabbed an AK-47 and shot three Taliban dead. Dranai chacha took him to Kabul and from there she took the flight of Delhi. She remembers the day when she tried her first escape no one could understand except Gulgutti. Gulgutti was illiterate but she had inner instinct. She felt for "sahib kamal" and also promised that she would not say even a word to anyone. At last she escaped. Escape would be a wrong word for that action. At last she came back to India leaving all the hurdles behind. She bid goodbye. She dis goodbye to Kabul, Afghanistan. She thanked the country to make her learn how to fight against corruption. They made her learn to find her own potential. She was not weak. She had guts to put an end to stop the torture against her. She remembered the day when she reached in Delhi after seven years. She stepped on Indian soil. She smelled it. It was raining outside. That was as if mother India was happy to get her child back. She was crying to show her concern. She stood in the rain. She did not run because in India she had no one to fear. She felt all her pains would be vanished if she got wet in the rain of her motherland. She could not forget the day.

Ujjal Mukherjee made a movie on her life. The name of the movie was "Escape from Taliban" when she was in Afghanistan she used to maintain diary. After coming back in India she wanted to write book on her personal experience. After a long time she was really free. She needed someone to assist her. She got the help of Ujjal Mukherjee. And the movie was made. That depicted her personal experiences in Afghanistan. She thought how she wanted to be the only woman in her husband's life. And how she faced the reality. She thought about the time of their courtship when they went for a movie and in movie there was an extra marital affair of the boy. Sushmita cried holding Janbaz saying "aagar hamara zinged me aisa hoga na, to hum mar dalenge wo pati aur wo aurat ko. Nehi chahiye mujhe aisa pati jo biwi k sath beimani karta". Janbaz consoled her saying "ye to cinema hain. Asal zindegi me aisa thodi hota hain?". How would she know that it would her own story? She would not help saving her husband from that heinous act.

Above all be the heroine of your own life...

"Amio jagbo" (I will wake up) said Banerjee when she was tired of all the tortures. She showed her careless attitude towards Shariyat. There was no law for men in Afghanistan. Gulgutti had illicit relationship with musha. Everyone knew except musha's wife. While being caught she has to accept the life of a slave but musha did not. That was the law of Afghanistan. Was there really any difference between male and female except the biological difference? If a men could keep thousands of wives and maids why not women? Because women were used like commodities this could be used once and thrown away.

Was every man in Afghanistan same like Janbaz or Nawab? Certainly not. Everyone was not like them. Dranai chacha himself was different from stereotypical Afghani men. He saved his daughter-in-law (sushmita) many

times from the Taliban. He was her lifeline in Afghanistan. He was there that was why she was saved time and again from those evil people. He himself arranged everything so could go back to India to her parents. Infact it was Dranai chacha who proposed sushmita to leave at night and not to wait for the morning and gave money. She remembered Dranai chacha. She missed them who gave her unconditional love and kept her as their own daughter. But what about those parents who did not see her for last seven years? What was their condition? Sayeda kamala was alive but sushmita Banerjee died. Another girl Ruma Mitra who faced the same did not have the courage to fight like sushmita. So, Ruma Mitra died but Sabina was alive.

But going back there for second was definitely a wrong decision to Banerjee. Her family, her friends and her neighbours also told her not to go. But she smiled saying that there was nothing to fear. She went. She wanted to meet Tinni, her daughter. She might have met. That was not known but the news that shocked her readers that she was shot dead outside a madrasa by the Taliban and they admitted that murdered her. The tragic story of *Kabuliwalar Bangali Bou* was ended like this...

In death sushmita Banerjee became brisk business. Her publishing house "Bhasha o Shahitya" hardly had any copy left. Publisher had to make so many conferences to attend the questions made by the readers. Different political parties called her as their party member and wanted to bring her body back. The poster put up by publishers saying that *Kabuliwalar Bangali Bou Khoon*(Kabuliwala's Bengali wife murdered). Sushmita's experience in Afghanistan was harrowing. It was an adrenaline rush. She wanted to face the changed atmosphere. She went. But the question raised in our mind was Kolkata become monotonous and boring for her that she went there without any information. She did not think about her parents. Was she selfish? Was it the punishment of her selfishness? Or it was blind love which motivated her. How could she go with a person whom she knew for eight months only? They met through their common friend and there he said that he loved her and proposed for marriage. At first she ignored but later he made her guilty telling her that it was not fair to marry someone else and love someone else. Was it his plan to destroy a Hindu? Was he knowingly did that? Was there any selfish motif of religious enmity? If he loved her why did not he told her that he was already married? Perhaps he thought sushmita would not be manipulated if he said so. Was it blind love? It seemed Banerjee's love was blind. So was the love of Janbaz?

"her prose was rustic. She was not a writer. She had the stuff but did not know how to handle it" said Ranjan Bandyopadhyay in *Anandabazar Patrika*. Criticism continued even after her death. Somebody said that she wanted to be Taslima Nasrin but without talent that was not possible. So was it a wise decision to marry that Afghani man? Fearless she might have been but had she ever thought that she would be welcomed back with open arms in the society which she left because she considered as a dungeon of darkness? Question raised and would be arising because everyone would judge him from their own point of view.

For my part I believe that woman should recognise their own place and there should be room for her own. Nowadays woman has achieved half of the sky and she can reclaim the crown. She has guts to stand against corruption but what about those who have proved failure to handle their own life? High heels would not be comfortable if you walk like anew-born calf. And feminism was not to make the woman powerful. They already are. That is just to change the point of view that the world preserves. Nowadays there are crores and crores of examples of their achievements but above them she is a mother figure. She is lovable. She is passionate. So emotion is not our weak point. This is our strength. We should not be so emotional that we destroy our lives by our own hands? I am not talking about sushmita Banerjee only. I am talking about all the women who have destroyed their lives and could not be back in their country. I am talking about those parents who are so unlucky that they are not able to see the face of their child for ever. Janbaz has no root in India and Banerjee has no root in Afghanistan. Is not it stupid enough to believe someone whom she does not even know well. Love cannot be so blind I suppose. Sushmita has born and brought up in Kolkata in a different atmosphere. Has not she thought about that? I assume she has not. After Reaching Afghanistan when she has seen the condition why has not she observed at least for a few months? Is it wise to rebel against the ruling party alone in fact when you are a stranger? Will people stand for you when they also do not know you well but know the Taliban? Sometimes woman empowerment is to keep calm for a long time and attack your enemy when they will be thinking that you are in a state of hibernation. She compared Afghanistan with Bermuda triangle which is still a mystery and no one knows how it engulfs everything. One question I should

ask that may be Afghani sand engulfs the outsiders but is not it also their fault to keep their step in that grimpen mire without knowing the depth? I know Banerjee has been in love with Janbaz at least she should inform someone before running away from Kolkata. We know that her parents are against the marriage and that is natural. She should take time to convince them at least. She thinks herself a fighter. She must be. But she is defeated in the battle done at home. So her daredevil gets a shock there.

Days after her death Karzai government said that they had arrested several people the Taliban group claimed that they murdered sushmita Banerjee. They alleged that she was Indian spy. "We killed sushmita Banerjee because she was an Indian spy" said group's spokesman Qari Hamza in daily beast. He admitted that his men kidnapped her, interrogated her and killed her. Here her brother Gopal Banerjee also raised several questions about her death and suggested to interrogate Janbaz.

The age old attraction of tall, fair, handsome men from mountains had always been a point of attraction to the soft and dreamy girls. They were like Christable who herself invited the evil. Sometimes evil figures were not like Geraldine. Sometimes they could take the character of Prospero who could be so gullible. Might be sushmita Banerjee was also stereotypical choosing her groom. She being an middle class educated girl has been the source of the dream of her parents who hoped that she would have a bright future. But instead of all these she was put to death only at 49 in midnight and in a comfortless place where she had no one as her own. Her body riddled with bullets and she was buried in a foreign land. The decision of her marriage destroyed everything. Though she was able to escape through her repeated efforts she was guilty as she had to leave Tinni behind. She decided to go back to Afghanistan when her parents died. The business set up of Janbaz in Kolkata was falling day by day and he had to return to Afghanistan. She decided to join him. Tragedy happened at 5th September 2013 when a few people came with a gun, entered in Patiya compound and tied up Janbaz and kidnapped Sushmita. They interrogated her for a long time and at last killed her. The body was found in front of a madrasa and face could not be recognised. It was also said that she came to know about her husband's illicit relationship within his family. She was shattered hearing that. And it was proved that she was right. An unknown person with whom she dreamt to relish her dream helped her in a round about way to end her life by shattering her dreams. Thus the tragic story ended...

In sociology, patriarchy is a social system in which males hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority and control of property. In the domain of family, fathers and father figures hold authority over women and children. Patriarchy means the rule of the father. The word is a Greek word which means chief of a race. According to Marxist theory, patriarchy arises out of the primeval division of labour in which women take care of children at home and men go out for work. Domination of women by men is found in the ancient near east as far back as 3100 BCE. In fact the works of Aristotle also portray women as inferior to men, they saw women as property of men and claimed her role is to reproduce and take care of men in household. Most possibly Afghanistan is still following this rule. Thinking has been changed. But their men are still at the same position. In "The Creation of Patriarchy" by Gerda Lerner, the author states that Aristotle believed that women has colder blood than men which has made them not to evolve into men. In 19th century various women have started to question the commonly accepted interpretations. They start to judge everything in the reason of light. The notion of patriarchy trembles. In our Indian society also we face the same problem. Sometimes we wonder if women are the biggest enemies of women. Here I have talked about the role of patriarchy in Afghanistan. But can we deny that our Indiais not going through the same problem? This is true that the degree of torture is lesser than Afghanistan but this is not ended yet. Still we, the women are afraid of being raped and molested. A raped woman is forced to leave the society but no one will teach the boy to learn properly how to behave with a woman. No, I am not judgemental about this. I know all the mistakes can not be done by men. May be we also have problems. When we are victimised we usually prefer to keep calm. But why? Why should we? Because we are born and brought up like this. If one protests today we label a tag with her that she is not good. Has anyone thought that it can be the boy's mistake too?

Sushmita wanted to change the society. That could not be possible until and unless they motivated themselves. Some women liked being tortured and thought that if their husbands were not beating them they

did not love them. They found enjoyment in oppression. Such, mentalities were in need of change. I have told before no book on feminism, no pamphlets would be able to raise them till they were sleeping.

“Pagli kisika sath nehi ladna. Jabtak hum nehi aayega tab tak dukh bardasht karte rehna” Janbazzaid before leaving India. Was that his concern and love? If it was why did he go back in Afghanistan when he knew here sushmita had no one as her own? Why did he leave his duties as a husband? The question leaved unsolved without getting answers.

I respect her for her power and courage. She fought to the moon and back. She got success. She was a part of goddess Durga. She was burnt. She rose again. She encountered many defeats. But she was not defeated. She knew who she was. There was no force more powerful than a woman motivating herself. So at last reading everything about her life one word that came out from my heart “I salute you. Wherever you are, rest in peace”.

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