**Book Review**

**The Final Frontier**

**Dialogues between Mother and Son**

by

**K.L. Chowdhury**

Maharaj Kaul

Human history is studded with great dialogs among wise, learned, and men of action. In this sense a dialog is a dramatic conversation between two or more people touching some significant aspect of human life or a particular problem at hand, which is emblematic of human condition. Plato’s Dialogues and Lord Krishna’s dialogue in Gita come readily to mind. But this book is not in that category, even though we have some dramatic dialogs between a mother and a son, while the former is dying and the latter is her caregiver. The dialogs do touch on death, faith, and humanity but not on a sustained basis to qualify the book as a work of philosophy. This is a book on the heroic struggle of a woman in late-eighties fighting her impending death in a state of pain and incontinence and a more heroic effort on part of her son to prolong and comfort her life. It is a book on love and heroism. The book is not about the meaning of death but about the drama of death. It is the more poignantly dramatic due to the caregiver son being a doctor, a famous one, which elicits precise medical descriptions, diagnosis, and treatments of the ongoing four year travail of the mother.

The book is of high-intensity with suspense building up till the end. Some of its caregiving and incontinence descriptions are graphically hair-raising.

The mother subscribes to a faith, is stoic, and long-suffering. She has lead a charismatic life as a mother, wife, and a human being. The final chapter of her life is her last challenge, final frontier, through which she comes out in flying colors. Her son is a keen medical doctor, deeply in love with her, who gives her care with diligence and passion reaching a heroic level. This is a dialog between faith and reason. As Joseph Campbell said that man – common people – who form the bulk of humankind, seek the rapture of life, not its meaning, which is confined to a small band of intellectuals. So the book’s soul lies in the epic love affair between a mother and a son, heightened by the backdrop of her rising crescendo of death. Mother is resigned to die but the son wants to impede it at all costs.

The book is dotted with descriptions of mother’s physical agonies and humiliations of her incontinence, and her son’s grand efforts to shore them up. But in the end death prevails, leaving the son humble but yet undefeated, depicting man’s heroic struggle against nature.

The genesis of the book lies in the son’s seeking relief in writing poetic descriptions of the travails of his mother and his interactions with them, as he seeks relaxation from the ongoing demonic stress. Little may he have known that these poems-on-the-run would one day turn into a book. The book opens with the mother in a geriatric state of health in October, 2007 and ends with her death in September 2011. The dramatic turn in her health comes in August, 2008, when she breaks her hip. After that her health had a free-fall, without a hope of achieving a material stability.

The book comprises of ninety-seven poems, arranged in three thematic sections: Dialogues, Soliloquies, and Silences. Soliloquies is the best. Some dialogues are real some are imagined. Some of the most poignant and tender poems are:

Speaking Through Silence

Go Mother Go

The Last Supper

I Cut Your Hair

Your Ring slipped Off

Another Chore

I Hear My Own Silence

What Use Life?

What Difference Does it Make

Do I Deserve To Be Your Son?

Willful Neglect

One of the most poignant elements of the book is in the poem, Charity and Memorabilia, where the author confesses that out of the material belongings of her mother that were donated to charities, he retained her comb and nail clipper. The reason being that they evoke such intense guilt feelings in him about two acts that he committed on his mother that he calls them profanities. The former because he cut her very beautiful hair very short, even though he did it to make her care easier. The latter because he neglected to clip her big toe nails, which were sticking out at her last bath. There are other poems echoing the son’s feelings of guilt in not giving the best care to his mother. Can you imagine that?

The book opens with the poem, Prayer, in which the son asks his mother why she is always praying, what boons she is asking her gods to give her. The mother replies:

No boons do I seek,

no favors, my son

I pray for health and happiness

for my children and my kin;

…………

As for myself,

I ask Yama to take me

while I am still hale and hearty.

And, when it is time

for the final journey,

I pray for you to be there

to lend me your shoulder.

In the second poem, Memories, the son asks her what she was thinking about. The mother replies:

Thinking of Kashmir, my son,

and all the years we lived there,

The son asks her why they should burden themselves with a place from where they were exiled, the mother replies:

We have been uprooted

and exiled from there, my son;

yet can we forget our roots,

can we sever the spiritual bonds?

......

Memories are the soul’s ambrosia;

They are our lifetime savings

......

They are our connect with the past,

and there is no present sans past.

Some of the other excerpts from the poems. The title of the poem is given in parenthesis. The speaker of the dialog, mother or son, is designated by M or S:

M:

What is life worth, my son,

without a touch of humor

(Another Fall)

M:

charity is not for making gains,

nor prayer for seeking rewards.

As to pain and suffering,

Have you heard of anyone

who hasn’t suffered

something or other?

(What use Charity and Prayer?)

M:

Remember, my son,

idleness is a curse

despairing even worse;

let not the mind wither away

even as the body goes to decay;

if the external senses part company

let the inner senses come into play.

(Uncomplaining)

M:

I have lived by my conviction,

I don’t mind the end,

how it comes and when.

(A Midnight Bath)

M:

The wheel of time never stops,

……

It neither slows nor runs fast,

and yet, it is the *karmayogins*

who find time for everything

in the midst of numerous tasks –

……

Moving the beads, my son,

and chanting a mantra with each one,

is neither a kill-time nor mere fun;

……

It is a means to an end,

a time to look within.

(Usher in the New Year)

M:

…let us not forget,

every trifling object has a function,

even a blade of grass in your lawn

and a small pebble by the ocean.

(Driving the Demons away)

M:

I would like to call it a day

and retire to that final abode

……

One can’t go there unless called,

for entry is by merit alone,

no favors, no seniority.

(The Itch)

M:

Whoever heard of a seamless shirt

or a seamless life, my son?

Life is a dress we go on stitching,

to hold it together

with new seems everyday.

The only seamless dress is a shroud

and a seamless state is death

(Seamless)

M:

Old age is like a ship

worn out riding the waves,

tired and longing to run aground

or rest at the bottom of the sea.

(Old Age)

S:

Yes, you are, for me,

the transcendent reality,

beyond shape or substance,

beyond emotion or cognition,

beyond any definition.

(Brahaman)

M:

…I like life to be meaningful,

and to live every bit of it.

(Craving Company)

M:

I don’t desire a longer run

than body can take.

I do not know if a book with the theme that it has has been written before. It is daring and by its nature very dramatic. To say that it is purposeful will be insulting to the book, as some have suggested that it evokes thoughts on care-giving to the dying. It does evoke those thoughts but that was not the purpose of the book. Those are its collateral benefits. The author says in the introduction that the experience of caregiving to his mother has transformed his thoughts on the nature of caregiving. He has instituted a charity in his hometown, Jammu, on its improvement.

K.L. Chowdhury lived the excruciating death of his mother twice. Once when he and she actually went through the experience, the second time when he wrote about it.

Poetry was the right mode to write this book, as it lends emotion and drama.

I congratulate K. L. Chowdhury for giving us an excruciatingly scintillating work.

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